NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

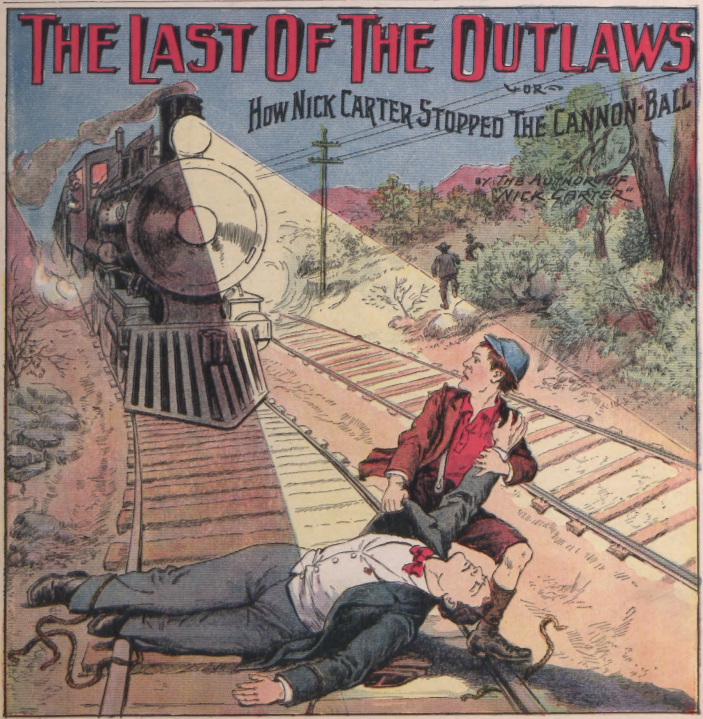
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 510 NEW YORK, OCTOBER 6, 1906. Price, Five Cents

THE LAST OF THE OUTLAWS

OR, How Nick Carter Stopped The Cannon-Ball

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The lad straightened up, braced himself and pulled with all his puny strength, dragging Nick Carter from the tracks just in the nick of time.

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THE LAST OF THE OUTLAWS;

OR,

How Nick Carter Stopped the "Cannon Ball."

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GREAT DETECTIVE'S NAMESAKE.

The flier of the K. U. & T. Railroad, popularly and locally known as the "Skidoo," was an hour out of Monkton City, eastward bound, and was skipping over the rails at an average speed of sixty miles an hour, when the forward door of the café-car was opened and a uniformed boy appeared.

He paused for a moment after closing the door behind him, and having glanced at a yellow envelope that he held in his hand, as if for reassurance, he raised his voice in a weird cry which announced:

"Wireless message for Nich-o-las Car-rr-ter!"

The detective, who was busily reading a paper while he consumed his after-breakfast cigar, raised his head, and patiently awaited a repetition of the cry.

"Wireless message for Nicholas Carter!" the boy shouted again; and then, after waiting a moment and receiving no response, he passed on through the car.

But the detective had hastily risen from his seat, and had preceded the boy to the platform, where he stood awaiting him; and as soon as he appeared, he said to him:

"The message is for me, young man."

The boy regarded the great detective quizzically for a moment, and then replied:

"Then, why in thunder didn't you say so in there, in the car, instead of coming out here to waylay me?"

Nick smiled as he detached a bill from a roll he took from his pocket, and pressed it into the boy's hand.

"You will know more as you grow older, young man," he said. "I am Nick Carter, all right, but I preferred that everybody in that car should not know the fact at just that moment."

"Oh! That's the game, is it?"

"Yes. You are to take this bill for your own, and put it in your pocket while I read the message. Then, when I have done that, you are to take the message back again and proceed on your way through the car."

"What for?"

"Because I pay you for doing it."

"I'm beginning to take a tumble, mister."

"That's right. Go through each of the cars, and cry my name just as you have already done, and then cry it back again, once in each car."

"That's all right, mister, as far as it goes; but suppose somebody else should claim the message?"

"Such a thing is not at all likely, my lad."

"Maybe it isn't, but s'posen somebody should?"

"In that case you will still have the message in your hand to deliver."

"But you have already opened it."

"That is true; but I have done so without breaking the seal. The gum was not dry on the flap of the envelope."

"All the same, what shall I say to the other man in such a case?"

The detective laughed outright.

"What a strangely persistent young man you are," he said.

"That's my business, mister. I have to be."

"Well, then, in case anybody else *should* claim the message, deliver it to that person, and say nothing. But I hardly think you will have occasion to do that."

Without more words the detective read the contents of the message, as follows:

"NICHOLAS CARTER, Aboard the 'Skidoo,' East Bound.

"Big Jim Folsom escaped from jail last night. Killed one guard. Mortally wounded another. Helped from outside by several men. Facts just discovered. Return here as soon as possible.

(Signed) "HERBERT WINSLOW,
"President K. U. & T. R. R."

The contents of the message surprised as well as startled the detective, and for a moment he quite forgot the boy who was waiting for the return of the message.

Then, however, he returned it to the envelope, resealed it, and said:

"Pass on through the train, lad, and do exactly as I told you."

But the boy still hesitated; and after a moment he asked:

"Say, mister, if another man should claim that message, and I let him have it, am I to tell him that another man read it first?"

"Yes, if you like," said the detective. "The contents of that message have probably been flashed all over the country by this time. Do as you like, youngster."

The boy strode away, and the detective turned back into the car where he had been reading the paper.

But he passed directly through it to the combination-car ahead—a combination of baggage, express, and telegraph-car—where he speedily found the conductor of the train, Jack Calvert by name.

"Jack," he said, for the two were well known to each other owing to many interviews they had had together in reference to the train-robbery case of the K. U. & T.,* "do you happen to know the contents of that message I just received?"

"Can't say that I do, Mr. Carter," replied the conductor, "seeing as how I didn't know that you had received one."

"It told me that Jim Folsom has escaped from the jail in Monkton City," said the detective.

The conductor pursed his lips together, and emitted a long, low whistle of amazement.

"You heard nothing of this, of course, before we pulled out at the station?" inquired the detective, then.

"I should say not!" And then he added, by way of possible explanation: "You know we pull out rather early. Five o'clock in the morning is pretty sudden for much news to go skipping around; and the newspapers couldn't have had the news of this unless it happened about midnight, or soon after."

"That is true," agreed Nick. "Now tell me."

"Yes, sir."

"What is the quickest way for me to get back to Monkton?"

"Why, sir, we don't make a stop till we get to——"

"I'm not talking about where you regularly stop. The point is that the president of the road wants me back there. What is the very quickest way in which I can get there?"

The conductor shook his head in perplexity; and then, half to himself, he muttered:

"If you could torpedo the 'Cannon Ball'—we pass her in about an hour." He looked at his watch. "We pass her in forty minutes, if she's on time. If you could stop her—but I'd have to let you off of the 'Skidoo' right now and here, sir."

"Then do it. You mean, I suppose, that I am to take a track-torpedo and put it on the back track in order to stop the other train?"

"Yes; that's what I meant, all right; but it can't be done."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't stop without orders, sir."

"I'll take the responsibility. It won't delay you more than a minute, Jack."

"I know that—but I ought to wire for orders."

"And that would take so much time that I would lose the 'Cannon Ball'; eh?"

"I'm afraid it would. Let me see your message, Mr. Carter."

"I gave it back to the boy, and sent him on through the train to keep on crying my name. You see, I didn't know what might be in the message, and I thought it might be important that it should not be generally known that I was on the train, and so—— Here is the boy, now."

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The boy who had delivered the message to the detective at that moment appeared through the doorway, and Nick called out to him:

"Here, my lad, give me that message!"

The boy grinned broadly.

"There's another man got it, back in the rear car," he said. "Told me his name was Nick Carter, too. Took the message and gave me another two-spot."

"Whaaat!" exclaimed the detective.

"Sure thing, mister. He's a wise guy, too—and here he is now."

The door had opened again, admitting a short, thick-set, keen-eyed man, who came rapidly forward and, with a smile on his face, asked:

"Are you the other Mr. Carter?"

"I am," replied Nick curtly; and he reached out for the yellow envelope which the other was already extending in his direction. Receiving it, he passed it on at once to the conductor, with the remark:

"Get that torpedo ready for me, Jack, and stop the train at once. I'll take my chances with the 'Cannon Ball.'"

And in the meantime the other Nick Carter was explaining:

"You see, sir, my name is also Nicholas Carter, and when the boy cried it out, I naturally supposed the message was for me. But when I read it I found that the contents meant absolutely nothing to me, so I was handing it back to the boy when he told me that another gentleman in the train had read the message—and so forth. I'm from Australia, Mr. Carter; where are you from?"

"New York," replied Nick shortly. His mind was on the torpedo, the stopping of the train, and the catching of the "Cannon Ball" for the return, and he was not paying much attention. After all, it was not phenomenal that there should be two Nick Carters in the world, although it was rather strange that both should have happened to be on that particular train at that time.

"That message seems to be something about what we call a jail delivery in my country," continued the stranger.

"Yes," replied Nick, still speaking absently.

"And you, I take it, are the great Nick Carter, about whom I have read so much—Nick Carter, the detective?"

For the first time Nick raised his eyes, and looked the other man over; and then, with a touch of humor in his voice, he replied:

"Suppose that I should admit that I am—what of it?"

"Nothing—only that I take it from what you just said to the conductor that it is your plan to leave the train here and go back along the road to——"

"My dear sir, pardon me for interrupting you, but what my plans are or what they may be in the future cannot possibly interest you," said the detective, turning away, just as the conductor reappeared on the scene.

But the stranger was still insistent, and Nick heard him say:

"No offense, I hope, sir. I am in America on a pleasure trip. Out for fun and adventure, if there is any to be had, and I was about to offer my services; get off the train with you, and go with you, and all that, you know."

The detective paid no attention to the remark.

Indeed, he barely heard it at all, and was not really conscious that it had been made until somewhat later, when he was forcibly reminded of it in a way that was truly surprising.

For now Jack Calvert, the conductor, placed a small package in the detective's hand, and while he whispered instructions about the use of the track-torpedo, he reached up and pulled the cord to stop the train.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREATEST PERIL OF HIS LIFE.

Have you, who read this, ever noticed that when a fast train comes to a rather sudden stop at a point along its route where it is not expected to stop at all, that all who are able to move crane their heads out of the windows, or rush to the doors to discover "what is the matter"?

Have you also noticed that when they do look from the train, they *always* look forward—that is, in the direction in which the train has been traveling—instead of backward along the track for their information?

These two facts, grouped as one, may account for or explain the reason why it was not noticed at the time that more than one man left the train; for the two who did leave it at the rear platform were not seen at all by anybody—and one of these two was the man who had announced himself as "Nicholas Carter, from Australia," and the other was a supposed invalid who had been traveling with him; and both had occupied the rear compartment of the last car of the train.

Trains traveling at the rate of speed pursued by the "Skidoo" at the time Jack Calvert pulled the engine cord, when stopped in that manner, stop suddenly.

The engineer jams on his air-brakes with all the power he dare use without throwing the passengers from their seats—which he could do, if necessary.

The consequence in this particular case was that the "Skidoo" halted very suddenly; but did not, in fact, come to a full stop, for while she was still in motion, Nick, who had abandoned his baggage to the care of Calvert, leaped from the steps of the combination-car with the small package of torpedoes in his grasp, and having recovered his equilibrium, waved his hand to the train crew and stepped aside to allow the train to proceed.

Of course, all eyes that were directed out of the train saw this act, for those who had looked from the opposite side were called to this one.

Of course, all eyes saw only the fact that one man had

left the train, and therefore in the wonder at the unheard-of proceeding none thought of looking back at all.

And then the "Skidoo" rapidly gathered headway again, and in a moment was out of sight around a slight bend in the road, for here the road passes through a mountainous country, and the track is wooded slightly and at intervals on either side of it.

Nick watched it as it sped away from him, and then suddenly came to the realizing sense that he was in the wilds of southeastern Montana, many miles from any station at all, and that it behooved him to get to work at once with his torpedoes if he hoped to stop the west-bound train, as he desired to do.

He opened the little package that he carried in his hand, and selecting one of the torpedoes—these are simply percussion-caps which are intended only to make a noise loud enough to warn an engineer to come to a stop—he bound it on the rail which the west-bound train must pass over, using the copper wire connected with each cap.

This done, he turned his face to the westward, and walked rapidly away, for it was his intention to place two more of them at intervals along the track in order that there might be no mistake in the stopping of the "Cannon Ball."

But he had not gone thirty feet before the sharp crack of a revolver echoed along the sides of the mountains, and Nick Carter dropped in his tracks as an apple drops from a tree.

He dropped directly between the rails of the west-bound track, too, lying lengthwise between them, and for a moment after that there was absolute silence in that solitude.

Then, from among some trees at one side of the road, two men appeared.

One was tall, slender, as lithe in his movements as a panther and as quick in motion; the other—to any one who had seen him—was unmistakably the person who had announced himself as "Nicholas Carter, of Australia."

The tall man held a revolver in his hand, as he advanced; the other was apparently unarmed; but they were both smiling as they hurried toward the inanimate body of their victim.

"I reckon that wasn't a bad shot, Cal," the tall man was saying, as they advanced. "I aimed to take him between the eyes, but if I had missed, I would have aimed at the body next time; it's a bigger target."

"It was sure a good shot, Jim," returned the other. "What do you want to go near him for?"

"Huh! I want to make sure that he's a dead 'un; that's all. I never forgive a man who bothers me once. I never let him live to tell about it, or to identify me afterward. It's been my policy always. That's the way I've kept out of prison—till this time."

"I never could understand how you happened to be caught this time, Jim," said the short man.

"Nor I, Cal; for a fact. He's the only man who ever arrested me—he sure is. I'll tell you about it after we've looked him over. But I made up my mind when he was doing it that he was writin' his own funeral-march, all the time. I didn't tell him so, and brag about what I'd do, and all that, like some fools would have done. I jest made up my mind—— Now you wait a minute till I look him over, and then I'll tell you all about it. I owe you that much and more."

They had come to a stop now beside the prostrate body of the detective, and were both looking down upon him as he lay there partly upon his right side, with his right arm under his head and the left one stretched out almost at right angles from him.

"Turn him over, Cal," ordered the tall man peremptorily.

"What's the use? He's dead enough, all right."

"I want to make sure, that's all."

"Turn him over yourself, then. I don't like to handle stiffs, Jim."

"Huh!" grunted the tall man. "Jest as squeamish as ever, ain't yeh, Cal? Until yeh get where there's something doing, and then I notice that yeh can move as quick as anybody."

He stepped forward, and kicked the body with his foot, and then deliberately he raised his revolver and pointed the muzzle at the back of Nick Carter's head.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the short man, as calmly as if his companion were about to pick a rose from a bush.

"Make sure of him, yeh fool, since you won't turn him over for me. I want to make sure that he's dead, and I reckon if I blow a hole the size of a whisky-glass through the back of his head, I'll sure know it."

"Go ahead, then, only hurry—only if it was me, I'd as soon shoot a woman as a dead man."

The tall man cast an angry glance at his companion, and then he laughed.

"I don't know why it is, Cal, that you can never make me mad," he said slowly. "Yeh'd jest tell the boys that I shot a dead man, wouldn't yeh, now? And then yeh think yeh'd have the laugh on me, don't yeh now? Well, yeh won't."

He dropped the gun into one of his pockets, and stepping forward deliberately rolled the detective over upon his back, so that his face was upturned; and they could both see that a splotch of blood had gathered directly under the visor of Nick Carter's cap, where he had pulled it down snugly over his forehead in order that it might not be dislodged while he was leaving the train.

There was no need for them to take a nearer view—apparently; and the body, only half-turned over, rolled back again into its former position when Big Jim re-

moved his foot from against it so that the wound was again hidden from their direct gaze.

"I hope you're satisfied now," said Cal contemptuously.

"Sure thing. Couldn't have been nicer, could it?"

"No; it was a good shot."

But still the tall man stood beside the body, regarding it. There seemed to be still a lingering doubt in his mind as to the efficacy of his shot, although he seemed to have had the evidence of his own eyes that the bullet from his revolver had pierced the brain of the detective.

Suddenly he stooped and seized the detective's feet, swinging the body around so that it lay directly across the rails of the west-bound track.

"What now?" asked Cal, who was watching him, with an amused smile on his face.

"If you look on long enough, yeh'll know," was the reply.

"Yes," said Cal. "And if we stay around here long enough we'll be here when the 'Cannon Ball' comes along, and when the engineer hits this little obstruction he'll be for stopping and getting off, and asking questions which we should not be here to answer."

"Say, Cal," said Jim, pausing in the work he was doing and looking around, "that ain't a bad idea. It would be a new feature in the work, Cal."

"What would? What are you talking about?"

"Why, usin' this thing here to flag the train, and then holdin' it up. What——"

"You can do it alone, then. Maybe you don't know it, but since the 'Skidoo' hold-up, they've been sending an armed guard with every train. None for mine, James, I'm going to light out. You can come along when you get ready—unless you want to stay here all day, admiring the effects of your shot. It's thirty miles from here to Porter's Pool, if it's an inch, and there isn't any too much cover on the way, either."

"Aw, hold on a minute, can't yeh! Don't yeh see what I'm doing?"

"Yes. You're tying the body of a dead man to the rails so that a train will run over him, just to make yourself sure that a man you shot between the eyes is dead," replied Cal, with unmistakable contempt in his voice. "I never laid you for a——"

He stopped suddenly, for the tall man had turned his black eyes upon him, and was saying slowly:

"Shut up, Cal, or I'll put you here beside him!"

He returned to his work then, and continued it silently until it was done, and it was not until he had finished, and Jim had risen to his feet, that more words passed between the two men; and then the tall one said, as if nothing had happened to mar their dialogue:

"Yeh see, Cal, I happened to remember, suddenly, that I had that bit of cord in my pocket, which is part of the stuff yeh provided me with for the escape, and which I didn't have to use and had forgotten till that minute. And then it came to my mind that maybe after a little the folks back yonder"—he jerked his head toward the direction from which they had come—"might trail us to the 'Skidoo' train.

"By that time, Cal, Nick Carter will have sure been found dead, and if he was found with a bullet-hole between his eyes, and it was known that we took that same train that he did, and that we didn't arrive at no destination, they would naturally suppose that we left the train somewhere around here, and that we were responsible for the bullet-hole.

"That would give 'em another pointer on our trail, and they would sure make for Porter's Pool, although we sha'n't linger there very long.

"But all the same, if yeh'll notice how I have tied him, yeh'll see that it's so's the wheels'll hit his head first off, for the cowcatcher'll clear it.

"Don't yeh see, Cal Carson, that after the engine strikes that head, there won't be any bullet-hole left to find? And don't yeh see that there won't be any string to find, either? They'll never in a thousand years know that he was *tied* there, for there won't be much of him left, exceptin' his clothes—*and don't ye see that it will be supposed that he was run down by the other train?*"

"Come on, then," said Cal. "If you are satisfied, I am. I only want to get away from here without any more delay. The other train is about due here now, and they're bound to make a look around for tracks when they stop to find out what they've hit."

"Sure, Cal. And that reminds me. Just you get over there and kick that torpedo off the track while I cover up our trail here."

And this was done, speedily and thoroughly, so that within a few moments more the two men passed once more into the cover among the trees from whence they had fired the shot, and again the silence of a mountain solitude slept over the place.

There was not even a torpedo on the track to warn the approaching engineer of the "Cannon Ball" that the body of a man was tied to the tracks in front of his locomotive.

Even that—the only one which the detective had been given time to use—had been removed by the two cold-hearted scoundrels who had deliberately planned his death all in a moment; and all because Nick Carter, never dreaming that he could have enemies on the train, had sent the boy with the message, crying his name through the cars, the length of it.

And now the "Cannon Ball" was due—overdue, in fact, although the two villains had not realized it; and Nick Carter was lying in the greatest peril of his life.

CHAPTER III.

HOW NICK CARTER CAUGHT THE "CANNON BALL."

The two men, Big Jim Folsom and Cal Carson, had been gone from the scene of their villainy fully fifteen minutes, and the distant rumble of an approaching train could be heard echoing along the mountain slopes, when a small, white, scared face peered cautiously from among the sage-brush that lined the sides of the road nearest to where Nick Carter was lying.

The owner of the face seemed to hesitate, for the head and shoulders followed it cautiously, and then the body, small, shrunken, and wasted, followed.

Then the face was turned suddenly toward the eastward, and a cry of affright escaped the small creature. His ears had caught the sound of the approaching train.

With sudden resolution he bounded forward, and ran with all the speed he could command toward the prostrate man bound to the rails.

Wisdom beyond his years, or at least beyond his appearance, seemed to be given to the little chap—for he could be called nothing else at that moment, with all those towering hills around him, with the great rumbling train approaching, and in the midst of that vast solitude.

He had seen and he had heard all that had taken place, and he knew that the man before him had been tied to the track. He also believed that the man was dead, but that made no difference in his determination to save the body from mutilation if possible.

He had no knife of his own—nothing with which to sever the cords; but he knew that most men carry a knife of some sort in their pockets, and therefore, the instant he reached Nick Carter's side, he fell upon his knees and began feverishly to search through the fallen man's pockets.

Fortune favored him.

The first pocket he attacked contained the knife he sought; a small penknife; and he opened one of the blades with great haste, listening with his ears while he worked with his hands.

The rumble of the train came nearer and nearer, but he cut rapidly and well, and then he straightened up, braced himself, and pulled with all his puny strength.

Desperation sometimes lends energy which nothing can overcome, and this case was not an exception to the rule, for just as the huge locomotive came around the curve—that same curve past which Nick had seen the "Skidoo" disappear—the little fellow succeeded in pulling the body of the detective clear of the track.

He did not hope to stop the train; he had not thought that far ahead—and he nearly lost consciousness in a faint when he saw that he had succeeded in what he had undertaken.

But a moment later his eyes opened wide in amazement as he saw the great monster of an engine slowing down and then come to a halt almost directly over him.

He did faint quite away then; and he did not regain consciousness until some time later, when he realized that tender, if rough, hands were working over him, and that water was being forced between his lips, drop by drop.

"It is food that I want, sir, more than water," he managed to gasp. "I'm almost starved." And then he lapsed again into unconsciousness.

But this time it was not for long, for presently he was conscious of his surroundings again, and a glass filled with milk was given him to drink.

His wide eyes looked at his surroundings in amazement then. He had never before seen quite the like of it, for, without knowing it, he was in the most luxurious apartment of the private car of the president of the road.

He noticed that there were people moving all about him, and that some of them wore clean white coats, such as he had seen the waiters of big hotels wearing when he had peered through the windows at them in the city.

He discovered, too, that in a large easy chair opposite him, a gentleman was seated; a gentleman who somehow looked familiar, notwithstanding the fact that he was leaning wearily back in the chair, and that his head was swathed in bandages.

"Please, mister," he said, "where am I?"

It was a uniformed man who bent over him to reply, and he said kindly:

"You are all safe—safe, indeed, for the rest of your life, little chap."

"And the gentleman who was dead, sir? Did you bring him here, too?"

"The gentleman who was dead has come to life, Johnnie. He is over there where you can see him, but he is asleep now. There was a good doctor on the train, and he has been attending to him and to you, too."

"But I saw him when he was shot," insisted the boy. "I saw them shoot him. I——"

He sat up in his amazement as the conductor replied:

"Yes. He was shot; but the bullet did not kill him. It wounded him, and rendered him unconscious, that is all. He will be well as ever again in a short time; in a week or a few days, possibly, the doctor says. He couldn't tell just yet."

"Oh, I am so glad that he wasn't killed, sir."

"He would have been killed if you had not saved him, my brave lad. The drive wheels went ten feet beyond where he was tied to the track, before the engineer could stop the locomotive. It was you who saved him."

The boy smiled happily, and was silent for a moment; and then he murmured as if to himself:

"Wasn't it a good thing that I ran away from those bad people?"

The conductor—wise man that he was—preferred not to notice the remark for the moment; but he continued to talk to the boy.

"Tell me how it was that you managed to save the gentleman?" he asked.

"Oh, sir, it was this way: I was there, on the track, alone, when the big train that is all painted white, you know, went by."

"The 'Skidoo'; yes. Well?"

"And it stopped awful sudden. I had stepped into the bushes, and I guess nobody saw me. Then I saw a gentleman jump off, and at the same minute I happened to look toward the back of the train, and I saw two other men get off of the hind end, you know."

"Yes?"

The conductor was perceptibly interested now, and he encouraged the lad all he could.

"I didn't like the way they acted at all, sir. They sort uh skulked, you know. That is, they dodged away from the train as quick as they could, and hid themselves among some trees beside the road."

"Yes. Go on, my lad."

"Then almost at the same minute the train went on. I thought it was funny that the big white train should stop there, and that three men should get off it, and that two of them should hide themselves in the woods while the other one waved his hand at the train that was leaving him, and I was just going to step forward and call to the man that was alone, when I saw him take something from a package and put it on the track.

"I thought that was funny, too, and I waited a little longer; and it wasn't more than a minute after that, it seemed to me, when there was a pistol-shot, and the gentleman who was alone fell between the rails. I didn't dare move, then."

"It was fortunate that you did not."

"I don't think I could have moved then if I had tried. But I kept my eyes open."

"That was good."

"And my ears, too."

"That was even better."

"After a minute—after the white train had gone around the curve—the two men came out from among the trees, and they walked slowly toward the man who I thought they had killed; and then they stood there and talked a lot—and I heard every word they said."

"That is splendid. After a little while, when you have had your dinner and the gentleman whose life you saved has waked up, you shall tell him all about it; and you had best not tell anybody else until you have told him. He is the one who ought to know about it first."

"Yes, sir. That is what I have been thinking."

"You are a wise little shaver. How old are you, sonny?"

"Don't call me sonny, please. People I hated called me that. I am fourteen years old, although I don't look it; and my name is Seth Royal."

"Whew! That's a big name for a small chap; and it is true that you don't look to be more than ten—or possibly twelve. How did you happen to be there, all alone, in that place, miles from anywhere at all, Seth?"

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather tell that to the other gentleman first, too," said the boy, striving to repress a shudder, which, however, the conductor plainly saw.

"I'll tell you this much. I walked a good many miles to get there, to the railroad-track. I thought perhaps a train would stop if I waved to one, and that somebody would take me aboard of it; and when you found me I hadn't had anything to eat for most two days."

"Great heavens! And you are almost famished now, aren't you?"

"I'm pretty hungry; yes, sir."

"Well, there is a nice dinner cooking for you, and very soon you shall have all you want to eat, and—that's lucky. Here comes your dinner now."

We will pass over the ravenous glory with which that small boy tackled his food—and got away with it, too.

It will be remembered, if the reader chose to keep count of the time, that it was at or approaching seven o'clock in the morning when Nick Carter left the white train, which was known as the "Skidoo."

Since then three hours had passed, so it was shortly after ten when young Seth Royal began his dinner. After he had eaten, the conductor advised him to lie down and sleep until the gentleman who was hurt should wake up.

And so it happened that it was after four in the afternoon before the lad had an opportunity to talk with the man whose life he had saved—with Nick Carter.

They were both still in the sumptuously appointed car, but it was no longer rushing over the rails at a speed of more than a mile a minute.

It had long since been pulled into the yards at Monkton, and had been switched upon a side-track there.

Many men had come and gone while the boy slept. The president of the railroad, two or three prominent physicians, and others, also; but of all this Seth Royal was blissfully unconscious; and so his pleasure was the greater when he did open his eyes, to find that he appeared to be alone in the car with the gentleman he had saved, who was seated in a big chair close beside him, watching him until he should awaken.

"Well, my little hero," said Nick. "How do you think you feel after your nap? Eh?"

"It is not how I feel, sir, but how you are," replied the boy, with unconscious courtesy.

There was still a bandage around the detective's head, and his face was very pale; but his eyes were bright, and there was a smile in them, as he replied:

"Considering what I have been through, Seth—they told me that was your name—I feel like a thousand per cent. I'm a little pale, I suppose, and somewhat weak,

I'll have to admit; but for all that I feel pretty good. Now, how do *you* feel?"

"Bully, sir! Honestly."

Nick smiled broadly this time, and the boy hastened to add:

"I know that isn't quite a proper word to use, sir—my mother used to tell me so—but there are some things that I want to say that no other word seems to fit; and anyhow, sir, that is just how I feel now."

"Good! A professor of languages couldn't give a better definition of the word than that. Now, what makes you feel bully?"

"Well, sir, I've had something good to eat; and I sure was awfully hungry. Then, I've had a good sleep, and I sure was most tired to death. And then, sir, *you are not dead!* I think that is the best reason of all."

"It's a generous one, anyhow, Seth. Do you realize how much you have done for me, and how deeply I feel indebted to you?"

Seth was silent a moment before he replied, and then, quite slowly, he said:

"I didn't do any more for you, sir, than you would have done for anybody, and as for your being indebted to me, I s'pose that's natural, if I saved your life; but I don't want any pay of any sort at all, sir; not in any form. All I want—and need—is a friend."

"Then you rely upon it that you've found one in me, Seth," replied Nick Carter, with more feeling than he usually showed.

CHAPTER IV.

A WAIF OF THE MOUNTAINS.

"Seth," said the detective, after a moment of pause, during which he gently stroked the thin and delicate hand of the boy, "I am going to ask you to tell me, as nearly as you can, everything that you saw and heard back there where I was tied to the track."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to begin at the very beginning, and to try to forget nothing."

"Yes, sir."

"And when we have done with that I wish to ask you some questions about yourself; but there are reasons why I think that this part of the affair should be attended to first."

"Yes, sir. Shall I begin now?"

"Yes."

We already know what it was that Seth had to tell, and how well and perfectly he told it, for it is from his recital alone that we have secured the transcript of it for this story.

But for the presence there of Seth Royal, Nick Carter would have been killed; but for the presence and perfect recollection of the young lad we might never have known exactly what passed betwen the two scoundrels who had so cruelly sought the life of the detective.

Nick listened to his recital to the end, barely interrupting him at all; and he was amazed by the simple straightforwardness with which the story was told, and by the directness of it all, which left nothing to doubt, and scarcely anything to guess at.

And when he had completed the tale, he looked up brightly at the detective, and said:

"Thank you, sir, for letting me tell the story in my own way. And now, there is one thing more which I haven't told you, and which I thought it best not to mention to the conductor until I had told you."

"What is that, Seth?"

"I knew one of those men. That is, I didn't know him at first—when he first got off the train, I mean; but afterward, when he stood facing me across what I supposed was your dead body, I remembered him."

"Which one was it, Seth? The tall one, or the short one?"

"The short one, sir."

"Then we are playing in luck, for I already know who the tall one was. You have told me in your recital of their conversation that the short one called him Jim, and I know from other things you have said about him, and from other things connected with what he said, that he is Big Jim Folsom, an outlaw and train-robber, who escaped from prison in this very city we are in now, only last night. The other one you have referred to as Cal. Once I think you mentioned him as Cal Carson. Now, Seth, who else is he?"

"He is Cal Carson, right enough, sir," replied the boy; and then, with tears in his eyes, he added:

"He is the man who made me what I am—an outcast. He is the man who murdered my mother by inches, for he stole her and me away from my home—her home—when I was only a baby. And ever since that time he has kept us prisoners in his mountain home. It was only a year ago that my mother died, sir, and I was glad when she did die. Maybe that isn't right for me to say—but I mean it."

"I think I understand you, Seth," said the detective gently.

"She was an angel, sir. She taught me what angels are, and I know! And please—— We will do our talking about him now. I'll tell you about my mother and myself later."

"Yes, Seth. Tell me where that mountain home is. Is it, perhaps, the Porter's Pool that you have referred to?"

"Yes, sir. That's the place."

"Where is it?"

"I can't tell you that exactly, for this is the first time I was ever away from it since I was taken there when

I was two years old; but it is back somewhere in the mountains from where they tied you to the track."

"Do you know how far?"

"I was two nights and one day walking to the railroad—but I don't suppose I went very straight. You see, I didn't know the direction very well; only by the mountain peak in the distance that the old Indian who set me free told me to follow. Besides, my food soon gave out, and——"

"Yes. I know. Do you think that you could find the way back again over the same track?"

"I don't know. I am afraid not. I didn't expect ever to go back. But I could try—if you were with me."

"Good boy! What sort of a place is Porter's Pool, Seth?"

"I don't know how to describe it, sir, except to tell you that my mother used to say that it was one of God's beautiful places, changed into a hell by cruel men."

"Describe it as best you can, Seth."

"Well, I think if you was to take one of those high-peaked mountains, and cut it off flat about half-way down, and then take out a lot more inside that flat place so that there was a place way down inside where one side was in the shadow in the morning and the other side was in the shadow in the afternoon, and make the whole of the place as flat inside as that table over there, you could guess at it."

"It's a sort of a cup in the mountains, then."

"Yes, sir. That's the idea; only I didn't know how to say it."

"How big is the place, Seth?"

"I have heard the men say that it was five miles across it in any direction."

"Then it is almost round inside?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there are high cliffs all the way around it."

"Yes, sir. There is one cliff that goes all the way around it. Just the same as if you were down inside of that cup on the table there, sir, and were looking up at the top of it."

"How do the people who live there get in and out of such a place, Seth?"

"That I never knew. I don't know now."

"How did you get out?"

"I was brought outside, sir, by the old Indian I told you about; the one who showed me the mountain peak in the distance and told me to follow that till I came to the iron trail. It was what he called it."

"But you had eyes to see with when he brought you out."

"No, sir. I was blindfolded."

"How was that?"

"It was the only way the Indian—his name is Mowitza—could do it. He told me, that day that I came away, that I was to get ready and go on a journey. I asked him where, and he told me then that once when he was very sick my mother took care of him and saved his life, and that he had promised her then that after she was dead he would set me free. Then he told me that there had never been a chance for me to escape before, and there might never be one again. He said if I wished to run away he would help me, but that he would never offer to do it again, and he made me promise that if I was caught I was to suffer torture before I would tell that Mowitza did it."

"And you promised, and came away."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me the rest."

"When I said that I would go, Mowitza roughly told me to wait till he came for me. Then, that same evening, as soon as it was dark, he came to me and seized me. I thought at first that he was going to kill me, but he only tied my feet together so that I could not kick, and my hands so that I could not strike or squirm, I suppose. Then he bandaged my eyes, and after that he threw me over his shoulder like I have seen them carry things, and we started."

"Well? And after that—what?"

"We traveled a long way; so long that I fell asleep, although I was awfully uncomfortable. But I know that the pony took us down a steep and winding path."

"You came away from the place on horseback, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"From the valley itself?

"Yes."

"And how long were you on the horse?"

"I don't know. I fell asleep."

"More than an hour?"

"Oh, yes; more than two, I think."

"What awakened you?"

"Mowitza—when he took me from the horse and dropped me on the ground. Then he took the thongs from my ankles and wrists—they were not tight, and did not trouble me—and the bandage from my eyes, and we were on the side of the mountain in the moonlight."

"What did he do then, Seth?"

"He pointed toward the mountain peak I told you about, and told me that the iron trail was in that direction. That I was to keep it always in view, and travel toward it, but to go around the hills and not over them.

"Then he gave me some dried meat to eat on the way, waved his hand, leaped on his horse, and left me."

"And you, poor child, had never been alone outside that mountain valley before—that is, within your recollection."

"Never, sir."

"How did you know how to recognize a railroad when you should see it?"

"My mother taught me many things, sir. We used to spend all our time together. She said I had as good an education as any boy of my age. And she told me about railroads, so I knew what it was when I saw one."

"And weren't you afraid when you saw the big trains go past?"

"A little—at first; but I only saw two before that on which you came—and I had got used to them then."

"It is rather remarkable," mused the detective aloud, "that my telegram should arrive on board the train just in time to have me stop it at the point nearest to the mountain retreat of those outlaws. Otherwise they would have been obliged to ride to Bronzetown."

"I have heard them mention that place, sir."

"Oh, have you?"

"Yes. I think they called it their nearest railroad-station; but if that is so, I wonder why Mowitza did not send me there."

"Perhaps he was afraid that you might meet them," said the detective.

"There is another thing, sir, that I think I forgot to tell you. I remember now that when Cal Carson and the tall man were talking together, Cal told him that they had thirty miles to walk."

"Good! Then we are to conclude that it is thirty miles from that point to their destination, by the shortest route, and that Bronzetown is perhaps somewhat nearer, although the Indian may have been right, after all, and sent you to the nearest point on the road. Now, Seth, how good are you at giving a description of a man?"

"I don't know, sir. I never tried."

"Well, try now."

"How?"

"Why, take a good long look at me, and then turn your back so that you cannot see me, and then give me a description of myself, only speak exactly as if you were describing to a perfect stranger."

Seth looked the detective over as calmly as if he had been an image of wax, and then gravely turning about he gave the desired description—and did it perfectly.

"Bravo, my boy! You'll do!" said Nick. "Now I wonder if you can do as well by another."

"What other?"

"Cal Carson. See how perfect a description you can give me of that man, Seth. You ought to know his looks very well indeed, I think."

"I do, sir; and I can describe him, too."

CHAPTER V.

A TRAITOR'S SECRET IS SOLD.

"As I remember you when you were standing on your feet, Mr. Carter," Seth began in describing Cal Carson to the detective, "he is about your height, but rather heavier. I think he would weigh more than you, sir, considerably."

"Well?"

"His head is very round and very large, and it sets down close to his shoulders, for his neck is so short that sometimes it looks as if he had none at all. His hair is as black as the wing of a crow, and straight and coarse; but his eyes are gray, and as sharp as needles. He always smiles, too, when he looks at you; he would smile at you if he were cutting your throat—and when he smiles you see the evenest, whitest teeth—like the snow on the mountain tops. Only there is something in his smile that you do not like. He——"

"You need say no more, Seth. You have done splendidly. I have seen the man. I know him already from your description."

"You do, sir?"

"Yes. I half-suspected before, but now I know."

"Where was it?"

"On the train. I did a foolish thing there, my lad."

"How could that be, Mr. Carter?"

"I received a telegram. I thought it might be wise not to let it be known that I was on the train, so I sent the boy shouting my name through the cars, as if I were not found. The man you describe claimed it; and not only that, but he had the effrontery to come through the train and offer to get off with me. I was preoccupied at the time, and have scarcely had time to think of it since till now."

"There isn't any wonder in that, sir. You have been unconscious or asleep most of the time since then," said the boy, with unconscious loyalty to his new friend.

"That is true. Thank you. Well, I know the man now, and he can never disguise himself so that I won't know him. And I know the other one as well. You have told me almost how to find them; only——"

"Only what, sir?"

"You told me one thing in your story which puzzles me."

"What was that?"

"I wonder if you are sure that you told it right."

"What was it, please?"

"You stated that one of the men said to the other that they would not be a very long time at Porter's Pool."

"Yes, sir. The tall man said to Cal, this: 'That would sure give them another pointer on our trail, and they would sure make for Porter's Pool, although we shan't linger around there very long.' That was what was said."

The detective mused for a considerable time in silence. Then he said:

"That remark would seem to indicate that Porter's Pool is not unknown to the authorities around here."

"I have often heard men say that they were chased there by the sheriff," said Seth.

"For leave?"

"Yes."

"Did they seem frightened about it?"

"No; they always laughed about it."

"And that would indicate that they were sure they could not be caught while there."

"Yes, sir. I have heard my mother say that nobody could get in from the outside unless he was let in from the inside."

"Humph!" said the detective.

"I think," continued Seth, "that the entrance was through a secret way which is only known to a very few. I don't think they have to guard it, either."

"Why not?"

"Because it was against the rules for any man to carry a weapon while he was there. He had to deposit all his weapons in a house that was provided for the purpose, and could only take what he owned when he went away again; and at such times men were always blindfolded."

"How many men are there in the place as a regular thing, Seth?"

"Only four besides Cal Carson, and those are Indians; Mowitza and three others who serve under him."

"What kind of Indians? What tribe, I mean?"

"I do not know, sir."

"I keep forgetting that you are not world-wise, Seth, you are so very wise in other things. Porter's Pool in reality, then, is merely the home of Cal Carson?"

"Yes. But it is the headquarters of outlaws. I don't know how many."

"What is the greatest number of men you have known to be there at one time?"

"Sixty-two."

"What! So many as that?"

"Yes. But only once. It was before some great raid was made somewhere. It was a long time ago."

"Are there often strangers there? I mean men who do not belong there?"

"It is hard to tell who belongs there and who does not, sir. There are frequently as many as a dozen or fifteen men there at a time, other than the Indians and Cal—Black Cal, they call him on account of his hair."

"I suppose that Black Cal is a sort of chieftain among them, eh?"

"I never saw him show fear of anybody until that time there at the track, when he was sneering at the tall man for wanting to shoot you the second time, the tall man turned on him, and told him to shut up. I never knew anybody to dare to speak that way to him before, but he seemed to be afraid of that man."

"I suppose, too," said Nick, "that I ought not to forget that Black Cal saved my life as well as you, Seth; eh? What do you think about that?"

"I do not think about it at all. Cal thought you were dead. He regarded it as a waste of time and the throwing away of a cartridge, to shoot you again."

"I wonder what his idea was," mused the detective, "to take that telegram, in the first place?"

The detective had spoken to himself, but the boy answered:

"May I say something about that, sir?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"I have been thinking about it since you told me about it, and I think I know."

"Good! You are a detective without knowing it. Let us hear what you think about it."

"Black Cal is a great schemer. The men go to him for advice. He directs their movements without going near the scene of operations himself. He thinks quickly and acts quickly, and is very bold. I have heard my mother say that if he had been a good man he would have been a great general."

"Well? What were you going to say?"

"This: When the boy cried your name through the train, Cal probably waited until he saw that nobody else in the car answered, and then he answered in order to find out what had been sent to you. Then when he questioned the boy, and found that there was another on the train who had claimed the message and read it, he hunted you up to find out what you were going to do."

"Young man, you are a wonder! Go on."

"You are making fun of me, sir."

"Indeed, I am not. Go on."

"I think his first idea in going to find you was just to talk with you; to make you believe that there *was* another Nicholas Carter than yourself—and I think he would have done it, too, for he *did* come from Australia originally. I have heard him brag of it."

"Good! Go on."

"I think it must have been a surprise to him when he found that you were going to leave the cars right there where you did, and that on the spur of the moment he decided that it was a good chance to get you out of the way."

"He came mighty near doing it, anyhow."

"And then, you see, he rushed back through the train, found the other man, and they both got off together. I don't know how, but——"

"But I do."

"Tell me how, sir, please."

"Why, everybody was looking the other way. Those two practically had the rear of the whole train to themselves. There was an observation platform on the rear of the train, but it was so early in the morning that nobody was out there yet. All they had to do was to open the door and slip outside. Then to jump over the rail of the observation platform was no trouble at all.

"You see, my lad, everybody there was looking the

other way—toward that part of the train where I got off. Cal knew exactly where they were, and—there you are!"

"May I ask a few questions now, sir?"

"You certainly can. Tell me what you want to know, Seth?"

"Are you going up there into the mountains after those men?"

"I sure am, as they say in this part of the world."

"Are you going to take me with you?"

"Hardly, Seth. You are not strong enough, and——"

"*Please* take me with you, sir."

"Oh, well, we haven't started yet. Possibly I will. I won't say no."

"Thank you for that. Now, will you tell me what that other man did—the tall one—before he was sent to prison?"

"He, with some other people, held up a train and robbed it, about a hundred miles farther down the road. I caught him, and he was in prison awaiting trial when he escaped."

"When you captured him, you did not recover the money, did you?"

"No. What in the world——"

"Wait a moment, please, sir. Was the train that was robbed called the 'Skidoo'?"

"It certainly was."

"Well, Mr. Carter, the men who helped to rob that train went to Porter's Pool after it was over, and the money and other things that were stolen are there now. I heard them talking about it, and I know."

"My dear boy, you——"

"Excuse me again, sir. That isn't all yet."

"What more is there?"

"That same lot of men who were in that robbery have planned another one. I heard them discussing that, also. It was Black Cal who wanted them to do it, and they refused unless he first helped them to get a man they called Big Jim—the tall man, you know—out of prison; and I heard them say that the robbery was to come off on the 16th. I don't know what month, but I suppose this one, and——"

"Wait, Seth. You take my breath away, almost! The sixteenth! To-day is the twelfth! Why, my lad, that is only four days off!"

"Yes, sir. That is what I was thinking."

"What railroad was it? Did you hear them say that?"

"No, sir."

"Too bad."

"Only——"

"Well? Well?"

"They referred to it as the 'Cave' road. Perhaps you know what——"

"Know? Why, of course I know. It is this road. The K. U. & T. And an E to that and it spells cute! Where, boy, where? Do you know what train, and where?"

"No, sir. I wish I did."

"Try to think of something more they said. Try, lad, try!"

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER PLANS A MASTER-STROKE.

During an interval of several minutes there was utter silence between the man and boy, while the latter sat with bowed head thinking deeply; and the detective was wise enough to wait in patience while Seth went over in his mind that conversation which he now but dimly recalled in connection with the proposed train-robbery—the train-robbery for the execution of which the escape of Big Jim Folsom from prison had been planned and carried out.

At last Seth raised his head.

"There is only one word that the men used, sir, that I can recall, which suggests that it might have referred to the train they intended to rob," he said quietly.

"Well?" replied the detective. "What is that word?"

"Let me explain first why I think it might have referred to the train itself, please."

"Very well."

"I know that there is one train on this road which is called the 'Skidoo.'"

"Quite right, Seth."

"And that there is another—the one which brought us here to this place, that is called the 'Cannon Ball.'"

"That is also correct."

"Do they ever refer to the 'Cannon Ball' as the 'Bullet,' sir?"

The detective almost started to his feet.

"Seth," he said, "you are a wonder, and no mistake. Let me tell you right here that there are three fast trains on this road which are locally, and, in fact, generally, referred to by name instead of by time or number. They are the 'Skidoo,' the 'Cannon Ball,' and the 'Bullet.' Now tell me why you think they intended to rob the 'Bullet'?"

"Because in making use of the word they always called it *the* bullet; never *a* bullet."

"My lad," remarked the detective, "I begin to think that your good mother did indeed manage to give you a good education up there in her prison home in the mountains; and you have a remarkably tenacious memory."

"Yes, sir. Mother used to say that. You see, we had plenty of books, and she taught me from them and from her memory. You know we had only each other to turn to, and there was a great deal of time to learn."

"Yes, indeed."

"And she always believed that some day I would escape from that place, and would go out into the world. She tried to prepare me for it. And now, sir, there is still one more thing. If you or the men who are con-

mented with this road know of a place somewhere that is called Pine Butte, I think that is the place where the robbery is to occur."

"Seth, will you touch that button behind you? It rings a bell to summon one of the servants here."

The steward of the car soon appeared, and to him the detective said:

"I wish you would get word to Mr. Winslow at once. It is almost time for him to return here now, but I wish to see him at once. Have him told that it is of the greatest importance. Wait a moment. Ask him to summon the doctor, for I must see him at the same time—the doctor who attended me here this morning."

These orders were carried out with expedition, and as the president of the road was no farther away than at his office, and the doctor's office was not far distant, it was not long before both men made their appearance in the car, and they came together.

"What is it, Carter? Are you worse?" demanded the president, when he came in, almost breathless from his haste.

"No, thank you," was the smiling reply. "I am much better. That is why I sent for the doctor."

"Sent for him because you are bet—— What the devil do you mean?"

"Be patient a moment, Mr. Winslow. Doctor, how much of a wound is that on my head? Tell the plain truth now."

"Why it isn't really very much, unless complications——"

"Bother complications! It is the wound I want to know about. Describe it to me."

"Well, if you had been wearing an ordinary cap with a cloth visor, that bullet would have killed——"

"Describe that wound, please."

"The bullet struck you almost in the middle of the forehead; you were evidently stooping forward at the time. It would have gone straight through your head to the back of it, but for the glazed visor of enameled leather of your cap, which deflected it. The result is that you received a hard blow, which stunned you, and which might have broken your skull; but, instead, it pierced the visor only far enough to make a cut along the top of your head which fortunately bled rather freely."

"Is *that* all?"

"Yes."

"Then what in the world have you got me done up in bandages for? Why am I here like a sick child? Take off those ban——"

"I feared possible consequences. I still——"

"Bother your fears! Take off there bandage from my head. Cover the cut with some sort of a plaster if it needs it. If not—don't! Please attend to it at once, doctor; if you do not, I will take them off myself. In the meantime, I will talk to Mr. Winslow."

The physician set to work at once, and the detective addressed the president of the road.

"Mr. Winslow," he said abruptly, "do you know of a place along the line of your road that is called Pine Butte?"

"Yes. It is——"

"Never mind just now where it is. You also have a train that is called the 'Bullet'?"

"Yes."

"At what hour of the day, or night, does the 'Bullet' pass Pine Butte?"

"I'll have to call up the despatcher to find that out, Carter."

"Guess at it for the present. You can come within an hour or two of the time, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"The time should be somewhere about four in the afternoon for the west-bound, and about noon, I think, for the east-bound train."

"Good! Now, on which of those trains—the west-bound or the east-bound—are you to carry an extra amount of treasure on the sixteenth day of this month?"

Mr. Winslow half-started to his feet, grasping the arms of the chair in which he was seated; then he sank back again, and sat staring at the detective for several seconds. And after that he asked, very quietly:

"Carter, I wish you would tell me how in the world you know that there is a treasure to be shipped that day, in *either* direction?"

"Easily," replied Nick. "This lad told me. He is straight from Porter's Pool, where he has been living since he was two years old. He has heard the train-robbers talking. Big Jim was rescued from prison solely that he might lead this raid. Which train, Winslow?"

"The west-bound."

"Then we have our work laid out for us, because at four o'clock in the afternoon of the sixteenth, which is four days hence, the 'Bullet' is to be held up at Pine Butte."

The president of the road was excited no longer. He was emphatically a man of action, and none could meet an emergency more quickly than he.

"I suppose you have no doubt of the truth of this information?" he asked. "I mean by that, that the boy has no doubt that *his* information is correct?"

"Not the slightest."

The president turned to the physician.

"Doctor, is Mr. Carter going to be able to take charge of this affair?"

"I think so, sir."

"Oh, do you?" laughed Nick. "Well, I *know* so. You understand now why I sent for you both."

"Yes."

"I wish each of you to promise me that the subject of this conversation shall not be mentioned by either of you after you leave this car, save in my presence. Is that agreed?"

"Yes," they both replied.

"And, Winslow, will you take orders from me in this affair? If so, I will land every member of that train-robbing gang in one of two places. Those who do not leave their bodies at or near Pine Butte will spend the next twenty years in prison."

"All right, Carter," replied the president.

"Then," said the detective, rising from his chair, for the doctor had completed his task by this time, and the detective was all energy now and utterly forgetful of his wound, "this is the first order: But, by the way, how did it happen that this car happened to be attached to the train that picked me up?"

"I had ordered it sent here to take a party farther west."

"I presume that Pine Butte is east of here, is it not?"

"Yes; a hundred and forty miles, or so."

"Good! I want you, if you please, to invite a small party of ladies and gentlemen—the ladies go along merely to give it the character of an excursion, you know—to come aboard of this car as soon as they can do so, *now*, for a picnic down the road. Just say that we are going as far as Pine Butte to picnic there through the day to-morrow, and let the newspaper boys around the station have the item. We can't get away now before midnight, but that will give us an easy run to the butte till morning."

"But what is it for, Carter?"

"It is to give me a chance to reconnoiter the ground. To study the place and its approaches without the idea getting to the robbers that we are doing so."

"But why do you wish the newspapers to have the item? I should suppose it would be better not."

"If the robbers heard that we had visited Pine Butte on the quiet, they might be suspicious; if they happen to see it in the papers—which isn't likely—they won't think anything about it, at all; and, what is better still, their confederate here will not regard it of sufficient importance to communicate to them."

"You think we had better start to-night?"

"Whenever you please, so long as you get me there soon after daylight—or *at* daylight would be better. And by the way again."

"Well?"

"Did you attend to my request about the news concerning myself?"

"Yes."

"Just what is the report in the papers?"

"In effect, that Mr. N. Carter, a tourist from New York, supposed to have fallen from a passing train by accident, was struck by the "Cannon Ball," etc., etc., and severely injured. It is thought that he may recover.'"

Mr. Winslow wagged his head and smiled. "How is that?" he added.

"That will do very well. There was nothing at all about the boy, was there?"

"No."

"That is right. Now will you attend to that business about the car-party?"

"At once."

"And what time ought we to leave here in order to reach the butte at daylight?"

"Oh, we'll get away about midnight, and take it easy. I'll have the despatcher fix the route for us."

"All right. But, remember, not a word about the expected robbery. Doctor, if you care to make one of the party I'll take the responsibility of inviting you and your wife, right now. I think that is all for the present, except that Seth Royal and I are going to take a ride about the city in a carriage. We'll get our supper at a restaurant, and return here in time for the excursion—and I shall probably bring two gentlemen friends with me. 'The sick man has been taken to a private hospital, where he is under the direct care of the railroad.' That is for the public, if the public should drive down to inquire."

CHAPTER VII.

THE KEY TO THE SITUATION.

"Mr. Carter," said Seth, as soon as they were in the carriage; the time was between six and seven in the evening, and the thoroughfares were thronged with people, "I am not going to bother you by asking about all these wonders of a city, which are so strange to me, for I know that your mind is occupied by other matters. But there is one thing that I would like to ask you about if you will permit it."

"What is it, Seth?"

"What is to become of me, sir?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"What is to become of me? What is to be done with me?"

"My dear boy, I had forgotten for the moment that you must be anxious about that question, but you see I had so thoroughly settled it in my own mind that it did not occur to me that I had not discussed it with you."

"Will you do so now?"

"I'll tell you what is to become of you, young sir. You are going to be my ward. You are going to be just as much in my company as possible from this time on, until you are comfortably settled in business, married, and have a family of your own. You are going to New York, and there you are going first to a preparatory school, and then to college; and after that I shall start you in the business for which you seem best suited;

probably in the railroad, with Mr. Winslow—but that is a long way ahead; seven or eight years, at least. In the meantime, you are going to be just the same to me as if you were my own son, and I am going to try to be father and mother both to you. There, don't say anything, for I haven't finished."

"But I must."

"But you must not. Just now we are going to some stores where you are to be provided with some clothing while I do the same for myself. I feel like a regular tramp—but, of course, you don't know what that is."

"No, sir."

"Just think of it. We'll visit a barber-shop, where we'll get a shave—I mean I will—and we'll both have a hair-cut and a shampoo. Those will be new experiences for you. After that the clothing-stores, and then the haberdashers—"

"What is that, please?"

"That, my lad, is a place where one provides oneself with shirts and collars and cuffs, and neckties, and such things. Then, when we have done this, we'll have something to eat, and possibly some ice-cream soda, which I'll bet you never tasted in your life; and some candy, which I don't suppose you ever heard of before, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I have. Mother used to tell me about Christmas trees, with candy bags and all sorts of things on them."

"All right. We'll have a regular good time from now till it's time to go back to the car. I must stop in one place just a moment on business first, and here it is. You sit here in the carriage till I return."

It was the office of the chief of police of the city before which the carriage stopped, and the chief himself, formerly a New York policeman, was an old friend of Nick's. He was fortunately in his office when the detective called.

"Hello, Pat Giblin!" he said, when he entered the office. "You don't seem to have grown any shorter since I saw you last."

"No, Nick. I'm still six feet five they tell me, although I never believed it myself. How are you?"

"A little shaky on my pins, I'm afraid. I got a rap on the head which dazed me a little. Pat, are you busy for to-night and to-morrow?"

"No more so than usual. Why?"

"Will you take a little trip with me down the road?"

"Down the 'Q-t'?"—with the accent on the Q.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"There is going to be the first act of a train robbery down at a place called Pine Butte next Sunday afternoon about four o'clock, and I thought we'd run down ahead and get a reception ready for the boys. That's all."

"Are you joking, Nick?"

"Never was more serious in my life."

"Why, sure I'm on, if you're in earnest."

"It's to be the real thing, Pat—unless we are there to stop it."

"Whoop! Well, that will suit me to a tee. Who knows about it?"

"At the present moment, not counting the train-robbers and yourself, three men and a boy."

"Don't like that about the boy. He might blab."

"He did. That's the way the three men happened to know about it."

"Oh, I see!"

"That's a great eyesight of yours, Pat—but not as great as your muscles. And I haven't forgotten that you used to be the crack shot of the 'Force,' either."

"We want some men to take along with us, don't we?"

"For Sunday, yes. To-night, no. I'll be back here after you to-night at half-past eleven. I've got a lad outside that I'm going to show the inside of a theater for a little while, if we have time after other things, and that should bring us here about half-past eleven. And I guess I'll change my mind about one thing I just said, Pat."

"What's that?"

"This: If between now and half-past eleven to-night you can pick up two men in the town in whom you can thoroughly trust, have them here with you."

"I have 'em in mind this minute, Nick."

"They needn't be policemen, you know."

"They are not. They are friends of mine who happen to be over from Idaho, spending their money. Miners, prospectors, all around mountaineers, and fire-eaters at the word go."

"Good! That's just what we want. Bring them along. Tell them that we'll wine them and dine them and treat them handsome, but that they are not to mention the errand we go upon in the presence of the other members of the party."

"Where is Pine Butte, Nick?"

"A hundred and forty or fifty miles down the track."

"We'll want horses for Sunday, won't we?"

"Possibly. I hadn't thought of that."

"I know a ranchman near there——"

"Wouldn't do, Pat. He might be in with the robbers, or, at least, afraid of them."

"He's a friend of mine, Nick."

"Of how long standing?"

"He stands just my height," said Pat, with a grin. "He's my own nephew, and, as for being afraid of the robbers—I never yet saw the thing that he was afraid of—man or devil."

"Good!"

"He has a man or two working for him that we might make use of if we needed them—and they are all Irishmen, fresh from the old sod, too."

"How do you know he lives near there if you did not know the locality of Pine Butte?"

"Well, it's a hundred and twenty-five miles from here to where I get off the train when I run down to see the laddie—he's thirty years old, but he's a pink of a boy, five inches more than six feet in his stockings, when he wears any—and if your bute is a hundred and forty, and he is a hundred and twenty-five miles from here, why, it stands to reason that he's near there, doesn't it, as they count distances in this country?"

"Pat, your arithmetic is something amazing! Good-by. See you at eleven-thirty."

It is not the purpose of this story to recite the delights of Seth Royal that evening.

But they can better be imagined than described.

He had never dreamed of such stores, of such sights, of such amazing surroundings, of such good things to eat and drink, of playhouses, of the wonderful costumes he saw, of the beautiful eyes that peered at him in his new clothes, which enhanced the singular beauty of the lad as a frame sets off a picture.

And Nick Carter!

It was the time of his life, he confessed afterward, and did more to make him well again than all the medicines and all the nursing in the world could have accomplished.

To watch the lad was enough for Nick.

At half-past eleven the carriage stopped again at police headquarters, and three giants of men, who made Nick Carter look like a pigmy beside them, entered, and they all drove off together to the waiting car.

"Pat," said Nick, as they were leaving the carriage, "are all your friends giants?"

"Sure they are, Nick; and all big ones, too, save one; and faith, he's called sometimes 'the Little Giant.' Maybe you've heard tell of him."

The party was already assembled in the car when Nick and his friends arrived, and very soon after that they started on their journey.

Seth was sent to bed at once, and Nick followed soon afterward.

But before he retired he held a consultation with Mr. Winslow and Pat and Pat's two friends from Idaho in the saloon of the car.

"It is my purpose," he told them, "to arrive there at or near daylight. And then, while the other members of our party are arranging their picnic things, we will take a look over the ground and settle in our minds about where the hold-up is to take place, and about how we are to meet it."

"Have you any idea, Mr. Carter, how many there will be in that outfit?" asked one of the men from Idaho.

"Not the slightest. They had four who were visible in the last hold-up. I don't know how many more were back in the bushes."

"Did you ask the boy how many there were together when he heard them talking it over?" asked Giblin.

"Yes. He could not tell. He was outside the walls of the house where they were talking. He says, however, that there were a dozen or more strangers at Porter's Pool at the time."

"Then I reckon we can bank on about a cold dozen of them at this affair," said Sibley, from Idaho.

"Probably," admitted the detective.

"There are four of us here—Mr. Winslow, of course, will not make one of that party—and, with Pat's nephew and his two men, that makes seven. Now, Mr. Carter, may I make a suggestion, if you please?"

"I shall be glad if you will, Mr. Sibley," replied Nick.

"Well, I have lived among these mountains all my life. I know the ways of these outlaws possibly better than any of you."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"To my way of thinking, I would rather have seven good men, in an expedition of this sort, than seventy where there might be just one who didn't count."

"You are right there, Sibley," said Pat.

"So my suggestion is that we keep the whole thing to ourselves. We don't need any sheriff or any warrant to do this thing. We'll all be sheriffs, and our guns will be the warrants."

"Now you're talking, Sib!"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Nick. "I believe exactly with Mr. Sibley, but I also wish one thing agreed to between us."

"What is that, please?"

"That not a man of them escapes. That those we do not capture stay right there at Pine Butte."

"Sure thing."

"No needless killing; but kill dead, if needful, just as they would do with us."

"That's the thing!"

"And after it is over"—he paused an instant, and looked around him—"Porter's Pool must be rooted out, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S GREAT PLAN.

The other members of the party were still sleeping when, at dawn the following morning, Nick and his three companions debarked from the private car, which had been drawn upon a siding two miles away from Pine Butte, where it was to await them, and it was almost noon when they returned.

The detective felt that he had accomplished what he came there to do.

There was probably no place along the entire line of

the road where nature had arranged things better for the purposes of train-robbers than at this same Pine Butte.

The train that was to be robbed, in approaching the place, had to climb a considerable grade, the greater part of it being through a deep cut; and at the very top of the grade a sharp curve was encountered.

Here there was a level space, possibly a quarter of a mile in extent, and beyond that, still another cut, into which the train must pass.

It was on the level space that Nick and his friends decided that the robbers intended to make the hold-up.

It was easy, too, to determine in what manner the outlaws intended to stop the train.

They had only to pile a mass of débris on the tracks just beyond the top of the grade, to flag the locomotive so that there would be no smash-up, and then—if they cared to do so—to order one of the trainmen to uncouple the passenger-coaches from the express and baggage-cars.

The locomotive would then hold the two cars at the top of the grade, while the passenger-coaches would glide away back down the grade, propelled by their own weight—and it would be up to the trainmen who were left on those cars to stop them with the hand-brakes if they could.

Or, as in the case of the other robbery on the same road, the cars would remain and the passengers be ordered out and lined up as they had been then, and robbed of their valuables at leisure.

Which of these plans the robbers would undertake to carry out, Nick and his friends could not determine.

It was plain, of course, that they were initially after the treasure that was to be carried on the express-car of that train; but their cupidity might induce them to indulge in the "horse-play" part of their profession, and to order the passengers out, as before.

Nick's plan for the attack upon the robbers was heartily agreed to by the others of his immediate party, but the detective had grave doubts if Mr. Winslow would consent to it.

It might mean the partial destruction of an express-car: it might mean the serious inconvenience of all the passengers, and to these facts Mr. Winslow was expected to object.

But it certainly *would* mean the capture of the entire gang of outlaws, and that was the primal object in view.

It was, in brief, to offer no impediment whatever to the proceedings of the outlaws; to let them, in fact, hold up and rob the train in their own way and at their leisure—and to capture them afterward, with the booty in their possession.

There were a good many arguments in favor of this method; but one which was the strongest of all, the detective regarded as final.

It was that thus a fight would be prevented immediately at the train, and thus the danger to the passengers themselves would be minimized.

And anyhow, the end justified the means, Nick thought.

What if the passengers should be called from the train?

What if they should be compelled to shell out, and were subjected to indignities in the way of having their hand-baggage rummaged? It would be returned to them finally.

And thus it was that the four men drew Mr. Winslow aside when they returned to the car, and unfolded the plan to which they had agreed.

But as Nick had expected, he offered an emphatic protest, and he came near to becoming angry when he saw that all four of his men were wedded to the plan.

"Why not ambush yourselves—bring a hundred men down here, if you want to—and make the capture just as they are about to hold up the train, but before it is actually done?" he demanded.

"There are a good many answers to that question," replied Nick, "but the best one is that we would not—certainly might not—catch them red-handed. At least, they would have a defense. They could deny that they had any intention of holding up the train."

"There would be the obstruction on the track."

"Yes. But they could say that they knew nothing about it. They could insist that they were dashing down there to remove it. We would find it difficult to prove that they put the obstruction there, even though we saw them do it."

"Then wait until they have actually surrounded the train, and attack them then."

"That," replied Nick, "would mean at least a dozen dead men, and probably more. It would mean also that some of the passengers would get hurt, for you could depend upon it that some of them would take part in the fight when it was going on."

"I don't like your idea," said Mr. Winslow, again.

"There is another thing, Mr. Winslow," said Nick.

"Well, what is it?"

"It is your wish to exterminate this band of outlaws, isn't it?"

"It certainly is, Mr. Carter."

"Has it occurred to you that when they approach this track for the purpose of attacking the train, they will be thoroughly on their guard?"

"I suppose so."

"They will be looking for danger ahead at every turn, then: but after the success of their efforts—when they are glutted with the spoils of the robbers as a gor-

murderer is glutted with food, they will be off their guard."

Winslow remained silent.

"The train will have moved on," continued the detective. "The outlaws will have carried their purpose to fulfilment without a sign of resistance. The spoils of victory will be in their possession. They will not dream that pursuit can be even commenced until two or three or four hours have passed. Their weapons will be in their holsters. They will be, in effect, disarmed."

"But they will fight, just the same."

"Of course, they will fight—that is, some of them will. Others will throw up their hands when we give the order."

Mr. Winslow was rapidly becoming convinced.

"Believe me," continued Nick, "it is by far the best way to do as I have told you. We, who will comprise the attacking-party, will be seven in number, all tried and true men—not one of us afraid of the task in hand. We don't wish to kill a man among those robbers, unless it is necessary, and we do not wish to be killed ourselves if it can be avoided."

Winslow nodded.

"We have discovered a place over there in that level between the cuts where we are all satisfied they have selected to pass after the hold-up has taken place. In fact, Mr. Winslow, *if we have discovered the place of the robbery, it is the only place by which they can conveniently approach or leave the spot at all.*"

"Well?"

"It is our intention to conceal ourselves thoroughly, but from the place we have selected we can see them, *and count them,* when they arrive, as well as head them off when they are ready to depart."

"Why not shoot them down as they approach?"

"We do not propose to murder men—even outlaws—in cold blood, Mr. Winslow."

"Pardon me, Carter. I spoke hastily."

"I know that. You are anxious; so are we—for your sake. We wish to do this thing in the very best way possible. By following the plan we have laid out, we will know exactly how many men they have before we attack them—and we can arrange accordingly. When they have left their horses with one or two or three men to guard them, we will be able to capture the guard, and, therefore, the horses."

"Suppose they should be too many for you?"

"There won't be too many, if there are a hundred, Mr. Winslow," said Pat Giblin grimly; and his friends nodded a silent assent to the statement.

"Again," continued the detective, "if they have their horses far enough away from the scene of operations, we will have an opportunity, after we have captured the guard, to put up a barbed-wire entanglement for them to run into when they are returning. In that way, we will have them practically surrounded, no matter how many there are in the party."

"All right, Carter, have your own way."

"Thank you. You see, we are determined that not a man of them shall escape. We are further determined to force our captives, or one of them, to conduct us to Porter's Pool, and to reveal to us the secret of obtaining entrance to that mysterious place. It shall be a mystery no longer after we have done with this affair."

"By Jove! Carter, if I thought that——"

"You cannot only think it, you can *know* it. We are all agreed to it."

"Then your plan is to let the robbery go on just exactly as if we knew nothing whatever about it?"

"Just that."

"Suppose somebody is killed down at the train?"

"That is their lookout—but it rarely happens that anybody is killed at a train-robbery of this kind. Everybody is wise enough to keep still and offer no resistance."

"At least, we should notify the engineer or the conductor of the train."

"If you notify anybody at all, every one of the present party here will withdraw from the affair altogether, Mr. Winslow."

"But the express-company might hold back the treasure, and send a dummy in its place."

"There would be no train-robbery, if that happened."

"Why not?"

"Because the same man who notified the outlaws that the treasure was to be shipped would find a way to inform them of the change of plan."

"Good Heaven! Do you think——"

"I don't think, I *know* that they have a confederate somewhere who has the power to obtain desired information for them. That was proved on the occasion of the last robbery; it is proved again now."

"It is only too true."

"You were astonished when I told you, from information given me by that boy, that a treasure was to be shipped by the 'Bullet' next Sunday. How did the robbers find it out?"

"God knows!"

"That they did discover the fact, and that quickly, you have ample proof—and you owe it to Seth Royal, by the way, that this robbery was not an accomplished fact before you knew anything about it."

"I am not forgetting that."

"Then we need have no more discussion, I take it, sir?"

"No; it is settled. I am only fearful that some of the passengers, or that an innocent man, may be killed while you are lying in wait for the robbers to finish their job."

"I don't think so. But if there should be, it cannot be helped. If we made the attack in any other way, it

is certain that somebody would be killed, and not one, but many."

"So we are all to act as if nothing had happened."

"Precisely. Nothing has happened—yet."

"And how are you to get back here to this place?"

"We are not intending to leave it—for any great distance."

"How is that? You are not going to camp here all the time, are you?"

"Hardly. Chief Giblin has a relative who lives about twenty miles up the road. We are going to leave the car near his home. We won't start away from here till dusk, so it will be dark when we leave the car. Your part of the work is to forget, for the present, that there are such things as train-robbers."

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMING OF THE OUTLAWS.

The remaining members of the "picnic-party," with the exception of the doctor, who was the only wise one besides the president of the road, supposed that the four men and the boy who left them, soon after their departure from Pine Butte, were going on a short visit to a ranch in the neighborhood, and would return to Muskton City by regular train.

It was late Wednesday afternoon when the detective received from Seth the first information of the contemplated robbery.

Thursday was the day spent at Pine Butte, reconnoitering, and it was after midnight of that date by the time our five friends arrived at the small ranch-house owned by the nephew of Pat Giblin.

Quite naturally, they were well received. An Irishman's hospitality is proverbial, and this was no exception, and so they sat and talked till morning, going over their plans.

Friday the time was passed in sleeping during the forenoon, and later in going over the ranch and enjoying the real "picnic" of the occasion.

Friday evening there was seven-up and euchre; Saturday was in part a repetition of Friday, save that in the afternoon there was a general "going over" of arms and accouterments, and in getting together the things necessary for the carrying out of their expedition.

Pat had informed them that his nephew possessed everything they lacked in this line, and although they were obliged to strip quite a section of his fence-posts in order to secure the amount of barbed-wire they thought they might need, the young Irishman told them to take all they wanted; there was more where that came from.

Late that afternoon they began to leave the ranch, one and two at a time, each departing in different directions, but all bound for the same destination.

There was no telling how early in the day, Sunday, the outlaws might begin to show up at the place selected for the robbery, for they would adopt the same tactics of going part way to their destination in parties of one, two, or three.

But they would not go all the way there until near the time of the hold-up.

They would have selected a rendezvous somewhere in the neighborhood, and it was doubtful if any of them—or, at least, if more than one, or possibly two—would reach the real destination at the railway-track, before a short time ahead of the appointed hour.

Mr. Winslow had been correct in his guess at the time when the "Bullet" passed Pine Butte, for the despatcher had afterward fixed the time as three minutes past four in the afternoon, and so Nick figured that his own party would have the greater part of the day of Sunday in which to arrange their place of concealment, to hide their horses—and that sufficiently far away so they would not whinny at the outlaws' mounts—and to select the probable place where they would make use of the barbed-wire, if opportunity should offer.

From the ranch, Sibley started out first, and alone, and shortly after him went Nick Carter, accompanied by Seth, who had begged so hard not to be separated from his beloved friend that Nick had finally consented to take him along.

It was arranged that Sibley and Nick should reach the ground a little before dark of Saturday, and that they should spend the night together near the spot, for to them was left the entire arrangement of the plans.

It was for that reason, therefore, that they were encamped together about three miles from the spot that has been referred to so many times.

The mountaineer from Idaho had chosen well the spot for their camp, and had built a small fire well back in a blind ravine, and there the two men and the boy were seated, enjoying the food which they had brought with them, and it was there where the others of the party found them, and there where their horses were safely corralled until they should have need of them again.

They were, however, astir—the entire party—before daylight, and by the time the dawn was breaking they had secured their point of vantage at the spot where they believed the outlaws must pass on their way to the railway.

To describe the place is difficult; but if one imagines a ravine which ascends at an angle of twenty-three degrees, from a deep valley several miles distant to the southward, to the table-land above to the northward, a good idea may be had of the spot.

The cuts before mentioned on the grade of the railway crossed this ravine at a point where it was level with the grade, and thus was formed the "level place"

which was mentioned in the preceding chapter; the precise point where the robbery was to take place.

From the railway to the top of the ravine—or, in other words, to the table-land—the distance was possibly a mile, and the place where Nick and his friends had selected to lay their trap was just about half-way of this distance.

Here the ravine narrowed considerably, and thirty feet above its level there were shelving rocks which, upon investigation, were found to afford exactly the shelter they desired; and that, too, with the minimum of risk of their being discovered.

Below, and all the way to the track and beyond it, the ravine widened gradually, and hence this point would form, in the plans of the detective, a veritable cul-de-sac for the outlaws, when they should attempt to flee from the scene of the robbery.

It was not an easy task, nor was it an extremely difficult one, for our friends to climb to the ledges or shelving rocks, and they were soon ensconced snugly there, to await the developments of the day.

Two were sent to the northernmost extremity of the ledges to watch, while the others remained directly over the point at which they had climbed to their perches.

"They won't bring their horses as far as this," said Sibley, with the confidence of one who is familiar with the character of the men with whom they had to deal. "They may ride them down this far, or possibly all the way to the track; but, as sure as we're here, they will send them back again, under guard, to near the top of the ravine."

"Why?" asked Pat. "Wouldn't that leave them to take all their plunder on their backs, to the spot where their horses are?"

"Oh," said Sibley, laughing, "the instant the train pulls out, after the robbery has been consummated, they will fire a signal with their Winchesters, and the horses will be taken to them on the run, if we haven't done something in the meantime to prevent it."

"Which we propose to do, eh?"

"Well, rather!"

"If I was one of the party," said Pat, still with conviction, "I would take my horse in there with me."

"Would you? And run the risk of having them stampeded by the noise of the train, or the sight of it, or by anything that might happen? No, sir. In a case of this sort, the horse is the only salvation that the outlaw has to depend upon. He looks out for him first."

"By leaving him a good mile away from him, and up a hill, at that?"

"You forget that there are always enough men left with the horses to handle them. If the outlaws should find that route to be loaded with soldiers, and they were obliged to run for it, they could make a masterly retreat up the ravine. Their horses would meet them half-way, or even farther down than that; they would mount, and away. They might not be able to do that if the animals were down in the ravine with them."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the sudden appearance of one of the Idaho men who had been sent to keep watch.

He came forward swiftly, but cautiously, and they knew that he had something to report.

"Coming," he said laconically, as soon as he was near enough to whisper.

"How many?" asked Nick.

"Two. It's the advance-guard. They are coming to look the ground over, probably."

They listened attentively, and, after an interval, they could hear the steady tick-a-tack of horses' hoofs against the hard floor of the ravine, and Sibley nodded his head.

"Two," he said shortly. "Tell by the sound."

The noise came steadily nearer, their horses ambling along in that gait which is peculiar to the country, and which is half-walk and half-trot, and yet is neither.

And after a little they came into view.

Our friends could see them plainly, for they had provided themselves with a screen through which they could peer without danger of being themselves discovered; and as they drew still nearer, Nick Carter felt the grip of Seth Royal's hand upon his arm.

Nick nodded. He knew what the boy wished to say.

The foremost of the two riders was no other than Cal Carson.

They were talking together in low tones as they rode along, and as they came within hearing, Black Cal was completing a remark, the finish of which was significant.

"——was going to plug him in the back, when I jeered at him so that he stopped."

"I never thought that Big Jim would shoot a dead man," said the other, laughing softly.

"That's what I told him. You had best not mention it to him, either, unless you want to be a dead one yourself. Jim is in an ugly temper just now."

"It's all on account of that boy of yours getting away. Eh?"

"Yes," admitted Cal. "He will have it that the kid escaped; but I happen to know better."

"How do you know better, Cal?"

"Mowitza told me what happened."

"What was it?"

"A rattler got him."

"You don't say! Why don't you tell Jim about it?"

"Oh, what's the use? Let him worry. It won't hurt him any, and the uglier he is, the more he saves me trouble, because he keeps the men in shape. You see, he——"

And here the sound of their voices gradually died away down the ravine.

The detective turned to Seth with a smile.

"You know now what has become of you, Seth," he said. "A rattler got you."

"Yes, sir. And I know now that Mowitza meant to befriend me all the time."

"I never doubted it, lad."

"And you must be good to Mowitza when you capture the place, won't you? He has never been an outlaw himself. Only one of the servants."

"Oh, I don't think Mowitza will come to any harm—unless he gets in the way," replied the detective.

"Mr. Carter," said Sibley.

"Yes."

"They have gone down there to take a look around the place. There should be two more of them along presently, unless we hear some sort of a signal."

"To warn them to keep back?"

"Yes. Hark! The other two are coming now."

His practised ear had caught the sound of advancing hoofs even before their guard came to warn them of it; but he appeared at the same instant.

"I would recommend perfect quiet now," said Sibley.

"By all means," assented the detective.

Five minutes later two more men rode into view, and one of them was Big-Jim Folsom himself.

"I wonder what he would do if he should guess that I am up here watching him?" thought the detective, with a grim smile.

These two were absolutely silent until they had ridden past the ledge, and then they heard the gruff tones of Big Jim as he said, in a surly tone:

"If I knew what had become of that kid, I'd feel a heap better about this affair, Mike."

"Why, haven't you heard?" asked his companion, in evident surprise.

"Heard? Nothin'!"

"A rattler got him."

"Eh? Who said so?"

"Mowitza."

"Then it's a thousand to one that Mowitza lied. The kid's mother nursed the old devil once, and he always was grateful for it."

And so these two passed beyond hearing, just as the two others came into view.

But the third pair rode past in utter silence, while the men on the ledge waited and watched.

CHAPTER X.

PLOTTING FOR THE FIRST CAPTURE.

With the disappearance of the third pair down the ravine, a fourth pair appeared, and they also passed in silence; and it was not until they were gone that Sibley leaned forward and, with his lips pressed against Nick's ear, whispered.

"Pass the word along for absolute silence, Mr. Carter. After that, give me your ear again."

The detective did as requested, and then Sibley whispered to him:

"I think we know now just how many there will be in their party. This is an old trick they are playing, to discover if there is anybody lurking on their trail."

"How?" Nick whispered, in return.

"They send their party along in twos, at short intervals, until it looks as if the entire number has passed. But there are two more hanging back; and they continue to hold back until anybody who happens to be watching on the trail feels sure that all have passed. Don't you see?"

Nick nodded.

"For instance," continued Sibley, but his whispered voice, as he used it, could not have reached the man next to Nick, "if a lot of tinderfeet were here who didn't know their biz, one of them might be for sneaking out now, and following the outlaws down the ravine, to see what they were up to. Or, again, if somebody was here who had simply heard them coming along behind, and he dove into hiding, to wait till they passed, he would consider it safe to follow along now. See?"

The detective nodded again.

"Well, that would be sure and sudden death. Any man—even one of their own men who was not in on this particular game—who happened to be found along here by them just now, would be killed just as certainly as you would put your heel on the head of a snake. In this business they don't trust anybody but the selected few."

"How long a time do you suppose it will be before the others appear?" asked Nick.

"Can't tell. Maybe half an hour; maybe an hour. Possibly two or three hours, although I do not think that. But those men who have passed will not come back up the ravine until the other two have joined them. You see."

Nick took occasion to glance at his watch, and after that not a word was whispered; indeed, it seemed as if hardly a breath was drawn for three-quarters of an hour.

But then Nick was suddenly startled by feeling the strong hand of Sibley grip his leg.

Neither of them moved, and Nick only turned his eyes, but what he saw startled him and made him wonder not a little at the craft of these outlaws.

The two men who now appeared descending the ravine were on foot, and they passed swiftly along, as silently as shadows. And as they walked they glanced keenly from side to side of them, above them, around them, studying the trail at their feet, studying everything with a keenness of vision which made the detective wonder if they would not see through the screen and so discover the eyes that were watching them from above.

But they passed on swiftly, silently, shadowlike, and were gone almost as soon as they appeared.

Sibley leaned back and chuckled, almost audibly, but not quite.

"It's a lucky thing for the success of our venture, Mr. Carter, that we took pains to leave no trail," he whispered. "That was a pair of sharp-eyed cusses."

"Yes. It seemed to me almost as if they would see us through this screen," replied Nick, in the same cautious whisper.

"They would, if any of us had happened to move at that instant. I was afraid that Pat would wink his eye, or do something."

Pat heard this, and grinned; but he made no reply.

"What is to be expected of them now?" asked the detective. "I have had a good many experiences in the West, but never one of just this kind before."

Sibley cut off a huge piece of tobacco from a plug before he replied, and, having stowed that carefully away, he said:

"They may hang around down there near the track for an hour or so, and again they may not. When they do return they are likely to come together, for they know now that nothing can pass them in this ravine without being caught, and also that nothing can get past the other two——"

"The other two? What other two? Two more?"

"Sure. Two more, back where these last two left their horses. Those four will probably be the guard for the horses."

"That makes twelve in the party."

"Sure. Eight to do the work; four to guard the horses. Don't you see the completeness of it?"

"Yes."

"There are twelve horses, with four to guard them. If the horses are wanted suddenly, each man of the four rides one horse and leads two others. Each has his place, too. It goes like clockwork, and woe betide the man who fails to tick at the right second."

"One might almost think that you had joined in an adventure of that kind yourself at some time in your career, Mr. Sibley," laughed the detective.

For an instant Sibley looked at him keenly, and then, in a slow whisper, he replied:

"Maybe I have. Who knows? I think we had best quiet down a bit now."

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon before the outlaws came back up the ravine, and then, as Sibley had predicted, they came all together, and they were talking and laughing together in low tones as they came into view.

Big Jim and Black Cal were riding side by side, but when they came to the place where the ravine narrowed, almost directly beneath Nick Carter and his party, it became necessary for them to go singly. And here Big Jim stopped.

"Boys," he said, "this is the only bad spot in the business. It's too narrow here. Let's halt here a minute. Cal, are you runnin' this thing, or am I?"

"You are, Jim, of course. I only came along to advise."

"Well, in that case, I'll tell off Linky and Mike to stay with the hosses, along with Bob and Pete. Is that satisfactory?"

There was a grunt of approval all around.

"I think we know the rest of the layout, don't we?" continued Jim. "We've practised it enough times."

"We sure have," responded one of the men.

"Well, we'll pack along, then, and have some grub. I'm hungry. At two o'clock sharp the down train passes, and after that, at about three, there is a freight goes along. I don't know the exact time. But we must be back before the freight passes, to watch it."

"What for?" asked one of the men.

"'Cause I say so. Shut up. We'll get back at the track, then, at three, and as soon as the freight has passed, it will be up to all of us to get that litter across the tracks. And now there is just one thing left to settle which we ain't talked over yet. It is whether we uncouple the coaches and let 'em slide back down the grade, or whether we go through the passengers as well as the rest of it. Who's got an idea?"

"I have," said Cal.

"What is it?"

"I think we'd better be satisfied with what we find in the express-car."

"Well, I don't. You don't always find what you are looking for in an express-car. The companies have a way of fooling you by not sending the stuff when they say they will. If we should happen to git fooled this time, or take off a bag of brass disks instead of gold pieces, as I did once, we've got the passengers to fall back on. There was twenty thousand dollars among the passengers alone in that last haul of mine."

"Still," said Black Cal, "it is an unnecessary risk."

"Yeh needn't stay in it, Cal, if yeh don't want to take the risk. I'll take the risk, and your share, as well, if yeh want to draw back. What do yeh say, boys? Shall it be settled that way?"

"You're the cap'n," replied one of the men. "I'm with you in this."

And then one by one they answered to their names, until all had assented, even Cal.

The consultation was over then, and the men rode on up the ravine, and presently disappeared from view and sound alike.

"Now," said Sibley, straightening his limbs, "I reckon we can take it comfortable for a time at least—about three hours, or a little less. I wonder if that boy of yours

wouldn't be a good one to keep watch for us, Mr. Carter."

"Yes, sir, I would," replied Seth, before Nick could speak. He was delighted at the opportunity to serve.

"Are your ears sharp, sonny?"

"As a jack-rabbit's, sir."

"That's a good answer. And your eyes?"

"As an eagle's. Is that a good answer, too?"

"It sure is. Well, you go along up the ledges as far as you can creep in safety, and get back from there quick, if you want to, and stand watch while the rest of us talk a little. Here, you, Pat! No smoking here. This is the ladies' parlor for the present. Man alive, a whiff of tobacco smoke could be smelt a mile in this air. Now, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes?"

"Here is pretty near where I leave off and you take charge, I reckon."

"No. Not by any means. You go ahead. It is a pleasure for me to act under another once in awhile. And besides, this is your stamping-ground."

"Well, I think we'd better all be captains for a few moments. The question before us is an important one."

"Let us hear how you put the question," said Nick.

"The question is this: How are we going to capture the four men *and* the horses, without the other galoots down in the ravine hearing us? We can't shoot 'em."

"That is evident."

"We can't very well rope 'em."

"That seems to be evident, also."

"And it's broad daylight, so we can't very well creep up onto 'em. *But*, we've got to get them."

"That is certain. Let us have your opinion, Mr. Sibley."

"I don't think that there can be but one opinion about it, and that is this: As soon as the eight men have passed us going down, and left the four up above on the watch, you and Pat and Phil and I *with* the kid, will light out for the place where the hosses are kept."

"The boy? Seth? What will we take him for?"

"Didn't you hear what those men had to say about him, Mr. Carter?"

"I certainly did."

"Well, it's my opinion that the boy is the only one in this outfit who can make capture possible, in the way we want to make it—and we don't want to lose any time, either, after the train-party have passed down the ravine. We've got our barbed wires to stretch after that."

"I realize all that. But what will you have the boy do?"

"I don't know yet; not till I have asked him, and I'm going to ask you to go with me for a minute, and follow him up the ledge and ask him. But it's my opinion that, having lived with that outfit as long as he has, he knows a lot of their signals: I don't know how he could help it. Boys are always having signals, you know. There is nothing they like better, and he was dead sure to get onto a lot of theirs."

Nick Carter reached out his hand and grasped Sibley's.

"It is almost as sure as that we are here," he said. "I did not think of it."

"Nor I; till that minute."

"It is the saving idea for the day. Seth seems to be the whole thing in this affair, doesn't he?"

"That's a bright youngster, Mr. Carter. Shouldn't wonder if he was President some day."

"Shall we go and talk with him now?" asked Nick.

"Yes. As well now as any time; and best have it settled."

And so Nick and Sibley left the others and began to make their way along the ledge in the direction that Seth had taken.

CHAPTER XI.

A CLEVER CAPTURE.

"Seth," said the detective, when he and Sibley were seated together in a secluded nook upon the ledge from which they could command a view up the ravine, "Mr. Sibley believes that you can be of great assistance to us in capturing the four men with the horses, after the remainder of the outlaws have gone down the pass to the railway."

"I?" exclaimed Seth, as loudly as he dared speak. "How can I be of assistance?"

"You have lived all your life that you remember at Porter's Pool, and you are a boy. Is it possible that you have lived there all that time, watched the comings and the goings of the men who have frequented that place, listened to their consultations as you listened to the one that has brought us here—is it possible, I say, that you have done all that, and do not now know some of their signals? Some of the——"

Nick ceased speaking, for he saw instantly in the added brightness of the boy's eyes, and by a gesture which was characteristic of him in throwing back his head a trifle, that Seth did know.

But it was evident that he did not yet fully comprehend what was required of him.

"Please tell me just what you mean," he said. "I *do* know a great many of the signals they use between themselves. I do not know what they all mean; but many of them I know."

"Let us go slowly," said Nick. "Those signals that you do know, for instance; do you also know how to imitate them?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Every one of them?"

"Every one of them; even to those which convey no meaning to me."

"Tell me about a few that you do know the meaning of."

"Well, there is the signal to call the men together for consultation. I know——"

"We don't want that. Try another."

"There is a signal which says that the last one to come in is a suspicious character, and must be watched."

"We don't want that. Try again."

"There is a signal like this——"

"Hush! Don't make any here. Tell me what it means, first."

"A signal which means, 'Lay low, and wait for further orders.'"

"Tell us what that one is, sonny," said Sibley, speaking for the first time.

"I don't know what it is by name, sir, for I never heard it only as it was made by Blue's Cal himself; but I can make it as perfectly as he can, and exactly as he does it. There is another one that goes with it, too, and I don't know exactly what that means, only I have noticed that he has never made it only when a group of several of the men were together."

"And what happened then, kid?"

"One, or two, or three of the men who were in the group would leave it and go to Cal."

Sibley clapped one of his big hands down upon Seth's shoulder with a force that made him wince, as he said:

"*Now* you're talking! That's about what we want, Mr. Carter. But hold on, sonny, before you tell us exactly what they are. Do you know how to call either one, or two, or three of the men from a group, as you say?"

"Yes."

"And you can imitate the different notes, or sounds?"

"Perfectly."

"Are they Cal's private signals?"

"I have never known any one but him to make use of them, sir."

"Do you remember any of the signals which relate particularly to horses?"

"Yes. There is one which means 'Stay with the horses'; another, 'Bring the horses here;' another——"

"That's enough. I reckon, Mr. Carter, that we've got about what we want. Sonny, you just practise over in your mind *four of those signals*, so that you will have them down pat when we want 'em."

"Which ones, sir?"

"Those—and I'll name 'em in the order in which I'll want you to use them: First, 'Lay low for further orders.' Second, 'One of you fellers come here!' Third, 'Two more of you fellers come here, quick!' And fourth, 'Bring the horses here.' Can you do all of them in the order I have named?"

"Easily, sir, and perfectly."

"And so that they will think it is Cal himself who is making the signals?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll do, sonny! You're the joker of the deck, you are! You take both bowers, hands down, you do. And now you just spend your time in practising those signals over in your mind while I slip down off'n this ledge, and scout up the ravine a ways. I want to see just about where that outfit has located itself."

"Do you think that advisable, Sibley?" asked Nick.

"Yes; for several reasons; and you needn't fear for me being seen or caught. I'm big of body, Mr. Carter, but—don't you worry!"

He was gone almost at once, gliding away like a spirit despite his great size and his apparently clumsy proportions.

During the half-hour that he was gone not a word was exchanged between Nick and Seth; and then, as silently as he had departed, Sibley came into view again beneath the ledge.

"It's all right," he said. "The signals will work. We'll go back to the others now, just to keep 'em still. It won't be so very long before eight of the outlaws will be roaming past us."

Nor was it.

The detective looked at his watch several times, and just as the hands pointed at two o'clock and the heavy rumble of a passing train could be heard down the ravine, the eight who had been selected to make the hold-up passed down the trail toward the track.

They were determined, grim-looking men, and they passed silently; but no sooner were they well gone than Sibley uttered the one word, "Come!" and slipped quickly from the shelving rock and dropped to the floor of the ravine below.

The others followed as silently as he, and, without turning his head to see if he was followed, Sibley led the way up the pass toward the top.

There was a grove of stunted pines just at the top of the ravine where it opened out upon the table-land, and beyond that point there was an almost level plain save for the fact that about a hundred yards out from the place where they stopped there was a small butte of rocks about as large as an ordinary house.

"They're behind that butte with the horses," said Sibley. "Now, Seth!"

"Yes, sir."

"Just tell them to 'Lay low for further orders.'"

Seth placed one hand against his lips, and an instant later there issued from them, sounding as if it came from the air high above their heads, and yet still so low that the sound could not have traveled very far, a perfect imitation of what is called the "scream" of an eagle; and he waited an instant, and then repeated the sound.

Sibley patted him on the back, but said nothing; and an instant later they could all see that one of the men who were with the horses, as he peered cautiously around the rocks of the butte, toward them.

Sibley waited until the men had disappeared, and then he chuckled.

"That cuss ain't sure whether that was real or not—and I don't blame him," he muttered. Then, aloud, he added to Seth:

"Now give the order to call *one* of them here to us."

Instantly, and so perfectly that it was startling, Seth imitated the barking of a red fox. He waited a moment, and repeated it; then he waited again, and repeated it once more.

The last note of the call had not died away before the man who was called Mike came swiftly around the edge of the butte, and, with elbows pressed against his side, ran rapidly toward them.

Nick and Sibley were already prepared to receive him while the others stood ready to offer assistance if it should be needed; and then, the instant he passed among the trees, he was tripped by a rope that had been prepared for him, and, as he fell, Nick Carter alighted upon his back, pinned him to the ground, and shut off his wind so that he could not utter a sound. He was gagged and bound before he realized what had happened to him.

After that Sibley allowed a quarter of an hour to pass before he issued another order, and then he said:

"Now, kid, call two more of them."

Again sounded the barking of a red fox, only this time there were two of them with distinct notes, and as before he repeated this call three times.

It was obeyed, as the other "order" had been, and two men sailed around the butte, running toward them.

They were tripped as the others had been, Sibley falling upon one of them while the big body of Pat Giblin dropped upon the other. There was no wind left inside them with which to cry out, and these were quickly served as the first victim had been dealt with.

"That's bully!" said Sibley. And then, after a wait of ve minutes, he added: "Order that last galoot to bring e horses here now, Seth. It'll bother him to bring velve all at once, and he won't come too fast; but your gnals are working all right, and he'll come, sure."

Again Seth's powers of imitation were found to be rvelling, for this time it was the wailing, almost childlike y of a panther that sounded in their ears, repeated ee times, as were the other signals.

There was a considerable wait after that, and then the last of the four men appeared from behind the butte—but he was mounted on one of the horses, and he came forward slowly, as if he were somewhat suspicious.

Instantly Nick Carter realized the danger of this sort of approach, and also how to overcome it.

He reached out one hand, and seized a lariat that Pat Giblin's nephew held in his hand.

"Get down into the ravine, all of you, and stop the horse!" he ordered quickly. "I'll rope the fellow as he passes into the trail."

They obeyed him without a word, and disappeared into the pass while Nick, with Seth at his heels, stepped behind a thick bunch of young pines where they had already placed the three captured men.

Then, while still half-way to them, the man on horseback stopped; and, as he did so, he imitated, almost as perfectly as Seth had done it, the cry of a panther; and instantly, without waiting, Seth answered it by uttering the bark of a red fox, just once this time. Still the man hesitated, and observing this, Seth again put his fingers to his lips and this time the "scream" of an eagle sounded from over their heads again.

"He asked me first if it was all right, and I answered yes; and then when he hesitated, I called one man again," explained Seth, in Nick's ear. "I've seen and heard Cal do it, giving the men practise."

The signals had the desired effect, for at once the man—Linkey, it was—came forward with perfect confidence.

He rode slowly, keeping his horse down to a walk; but he had returned his Colt .44 to his holster instead of carrying it in his hand.

And so he rode among the trees, and passed the bunch where Nick Carter was hidden; but he had barely done so when the detective stepped out behind him, and with a silent swing of the rope, he hurled it forward so that the loop fell over Linkey's head as truly as if it had been dropped there from above.

With a quick jerk, the detective "set" it, and he did it so that the loop closed around Linkey's throat, thus preventing him from calling out, and at the same time jerking him bodily from the saddle to the earth. The horse he rode startled, dashed forward, but the strong hand of Pat Giblin caught him on one side and Sibley seized him on the other; and then, Linkey, like the others, was bound and gagged.

And the binding of these men was done with barbed

wire, too, while Nick Carter had prepared the gags himself, so there was no danger that any of them would escape.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP OF THE TANGLED WIRES.

Nick looked at his watch and discovered that it was exactly three o'clock; and at the same moment he heard the rumble of the passing freight on the track below them.

"Hear that?" said Sibley, with a low laugh. "The outfit down below will be rather busy for the next half or three-quarters of an hour, fixing their barrier across the track, eh? And I reckon we'll be busy, too, fixing our barbed-wire entanglement. That's your job, Mr. Carter; and while we're doing it, Seth had better take this hoss back and leave him with the others."

And the following half-hour was indeed a busy time.

Nick led his party back down the ravine to the place where they had been concealed, and there wire after wire, until there were dozens of strands of them, were stretched across the ravine, until an entanglement was created through which no man might have hoped to pass in many minutes of time unless he happened to be provided with nippers.

After that was done, a second network of the wires was woven, of a sufficient length to reach across the ravine; and this was made fast at one side, and then was stretched along the side of the ravine leading downward. At the lower end of this network, Pat Giblin and his nephew were concealed, and it was their duty, as soon as the outlaws encountered the network above and had been ordered to throw up their hands, to dash across the ravine with the second network, thus effectually hemming them in so that there would be no possibility that one of them could escape alive.

Next, Nick stationed Sibley and the others upon the ledges where the party had first hidden, and he himself took up a position almost opposite Giblin and his nephew, only a trifle farther up the ravine—that is, at a point where the lower network would reach the other side when the two Giblins should dash across with it to fasten it. Seth was with the horses.

"Now," said Nick, "listen. These are my final orders: There are four of you on the ledges, and three of us down here. Not a word is to be spoken or a sound made by any of you until the leader of the outlaws discovers the barrier ahead of him. You will watch him for your signal, not me. If you can anticipate his motions by the fraction of an instant, you are to do this. When he sees the wire he will start back and utter an exclamation. The instant he does that, *every last one of you is to leap to his feet and shout:*

"'*Hands up, or you are dead ones!*' That is all you are to say, but say it, all of you. Sibley will keep his eye on the first two, I will do the same for the second two, Forbes will take the third two, and Pat the fourth. The remaining three of you will watch the whole outfit, and if there is one among the number of outlaws who does not obey the order instantly, the man who is watching him *must shoot him!* Now, are you all ready?"

"Ready!" they replied as with one voice.

"Then get to your places, and let not a word be spoken until the first outlaw reaches the wire."

It was five minutes to four then, and during eight minutes thereafter there was no sound.

Then they heard the rumble of the approaching train; then a shrill whistle shrieked out: then there came a loud crash and the sound of escaping steam, and the waiting men knew that the locomotive, despite signals, had struck the barrier, and was doubtless wrecked.

Then came rifle-shots, and shouting; and more rifle-shots, and more shouting; and then at intervals a shot rang out from below, and they knew that the hold-up had been consummated, and that the train and its passengers were being looted—and then there was a long wait, or at least it seemed interminable to these men.

But it came to an end at last.

They heard the sound of rushing feet, as the outlaws ascended the path through the ravine, and in a moment more they came into view, Big Jim leading the van, closely followed by Black Cal and the others.

And as they came into view, Jim Folsom raised a pistol, and fired three shots into the air, then waited a second and fired the two remaining shots it contained. That was doubtless a signal for the horses.

The outlaws were not exactly running, but they were traveling with all the speed they could muster under the burdens they bore, for they were weighted down with loot. And then the pivotal moment came.

Big Jim ran plump into the wire before he discovered it, and was effectually caught in its meshes, and Cal was so closely behind him that he stumbled and fell over the big fellow.

They both uttered loud curses, but their voices were drowned by the sharp command of voices from every side of them and from above them, seemingly proceeding from a score of men:

"Head up your hands, or you are dead ones! Hands up! Hands up! Don't move!"

It might have happened that there would have been resistance on the part of the outlaws but for the fact that both of the leaders were down and out by reason of their precipitate rush against the wires in which they were hopelessly entangled—and again there might not have been a shot fired in any case.

The surprise was too complete. The consternation was too awful. The effect of the entire proceeding was too paralyzing. The outlaws admitted afterward that they thought they were surrounded by at least twenty men, and many of them supposed that their four men with the horses had gone back on them. Cal thought that Jim had betrayed them all; and Jim believed that Cal had done so. Men in that sort of business have no confidence in one another.

But there was not a shot fired—not one.

The outlaws dropped their booty to the ground, and one and all then held their hands in the air and kept their backs toward their captors until one after another they were bound hand and foot with sections of the barbed wire that had been their undoing.

And Nick Carter left this work to his men while he went down the ravine toward the track, for he believed that the train was still there.

Half-way down he was surprised to encounter no less a person than Mr. Winslow himself, who had made it a point to be a passenger on that train, and who, having perfect faith in the detective, was now leading half a hundred unarmed passengers up the ravine to find out what had been done.

There were men enough to carry all the prisoners, as well as their booty, back to the train without unbinding one of the outlaws, and this was done.

The engine had not been wrecked, after all, and it was only necessary that the barrier should be cleared away for the train to proceed; and so it happened that within an hour after the outlaws came into contact with the barbed wire they were—all but one of them—on their way to life sentences, while Nick Carter and his companions found themselves again alone in the ravine.

The wires were cut away, and left along the sides of the pass. John Giblin and his two cowboys from the ranch were sent home with six of the outlaws' horses, and also with their own, which were awaiting them three miles away, it will be remembered, and then, with the six of the outlaws' horses that remained, Nick and Pat, with his two friends, and Seth mounted and rode away toward Porter's Pool.

To the sixth horse Black Cal Carson was securely bound with wire, and it did not concern his captors that the barbs pricked into his flesh whenever he moved unnecessarily.

He understood that he was to lead them to Porter's Pool, and was to reveal its secrets to them, also, and that if he resisted at all he was to suffer slow torture until he told everything.

In the beginning of the ride, he swore that he would never tell, not if they cut him apart piecemeal; but Nick had heard such declarations before.

Before half the ride was over, he begged that the wires upon him be loosed; but nobody seemed to hear him at all; and by the time the strange mountain in which Porter's Pool was located hove into sight, he was quite willing to tell all he knew.

When they came to the foot of the mountain, he directed them to the path by which they should ascend, and he told them how to signal that he was coming.

And they found, after all, that it was a very simple means of entrance and egress that had been employed there.

A spring somewhere up on the side of the mountain created a stream of water that was hot almost to the point of boiling; near the base of the mountain it created a considerable fall over a ledge where it spread out into a wide sheet from which clouds of steam and spray ascended. The party had but to pass behind this fall of hot water to find themselves inside a cavern which presently opened into a fissure, and by ascending this they came out at last into a corral where the horses, or part of them, were always kept.

Mowitza was on guard ready to receive them when they issued into the corral, for he had heard his master's signal; but when he discovered that Black Cal was a hopeless prisoner, he grinned at him, and shook his fist in his face, and fingered the haft of a knife at his belt.

The old Indian was unfeignedly delighted to see Seth again.

"Good! Heap good!" he said, over and over again, as he looked at the lad. Then he turned to Nick, at the same time pointing toward his late master.

"He hate—much hate—bad man—no good—bad medicine. Huh!" he said; and it was only after persuasion that he consented not to kill the outlaw then and there.

But the story is told.

All the plunder—that is, a great part of it—of many robberies, was found at Porter's Pool; but of human beings there were none there at all save Mowitza and his three Indians.

And when Nick and his friends had gathered together and placed upon packhorses all the plunder that they cared to take away with them, to be returned in time to its owners, and when Seth Royal had gotten together all the loved relics he could find of his mother, and of his life with her in that really beautiful spot, though so sad for them, Mowitza and his Indians were left again in charge until the officers of the State should come to take formal possession—and they had instructions to admit no others.

And so Nick Carter and his friends rode away from Porter's Pool triumphant. The requiem of the last of the outlaws had been rung, and the curtain was down on the train-robberies of the Northwest.

Of course, Black Cal was taken back with them, and, of course, he met with the fate he so richly deserved. He was given terms of twenty years each on four separate counts, making eighty years in all, which, of course, was life imprisonment.

And Seth?

But that is another story. Suffice it to say here that he returned to New York with the detective, there to follow out the plans which Nick Carter had already outlined for him.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 511, will be "Nick Carter's Twin Mystery; or, The Secret of the Green Automobile."

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

TIP TOP WEEKLY

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a free colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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